



09 夢導く旅人

Kyohhei Iwai

岩井恭平

ムシウタ

M U S H I - U T A

角川スニーカー文庫

Novel Illustrations



ムシウタ

M U S H I - U T A

06. 夢導く旅人

岩井恭平



キミはその少女すらも失って、
あいかわらず独りで戦っているのかな……？



0.00 The Others

There were few vehicles passing one another on the national highway filled with the scent of the ocean.

As it was early morning, the fierce wind blowing at a speed of 60 kmph was cold.

But it felt pleasant.

Riding along the coastal road, she took a full breath of February's wind into her lungs.

"Hmmm."

Dashing through the coastal road on a Vespa, the girl exhaled in satisfaction. A crunching sound came from her mouth that contained a lollipop.

Her breath became a white mist and immediately vanished behind her.

The analogue gasoline meter displayed the tank was near empty. The girl had been unable to find any gas stations for a while now.

Running on full throttle, the Vespa passed next to a signpost in the blink of an eye.

"Holland City, is it? What a strange name."

Rolling around the candy in her mouth, she muttered to herself.

She could see a large city in front of her. It faced toward the gulf coast and within it she could see tall buildings as well as a dome-shaped structure that seemed like some sort of composite facility.

Holland City. Since it was indicated on the signpost it had to be the city's official name. This was the first time even for her, who had wandered all around Japan, to see a city with a foreign name.

In any case, she was saved by reaching a place where she could refuel. While driving around erratically for no reason, the girl pushed on towards Holland City.

—This world was very beautiful.

Both in the vast ocean she could see to her right as well as among the crowded man-made land ahead of her she could feel the breath of life.

Both humans and fish were emitting excessive life energy. These all converged, swelled, and became a powerful wave that attracted the girl. She couldn't resist their powers.

Those emitting the waves of power weren't just living beings with shapes.

Including this girl, there were very few people who were able to perceive this. And that was why she took on the duty to continue her journey.

"Hmmm, what a nice city."

While muttering to herself in a carefree manner, the girl entered Holland City. The scent of seawater changed into air polluted by exhaust gas. The sounds of cutting through the wind were replaced by the hustle and bustle of people or the sounds of car engines.

It was a powerful city. She could feel the people's overflowing power on her skin.

She soon found a gas station. She slowed down and parked her Vespa next to the fuel filler.

"Do fill up as much as this is enough for."

She submitted several notes towards the young employee, apparently a part-timer, who approached her. It was all the money she had. It should probably fill about half the tank.

The employee stood there for an instant staring at her in puzzlement.

Now then, why was he surprised—

1. He sympathized with the circumstances of the girl who couldn't afford to fully fuel her scooter.

2. He was surprised by the girl's special way of speaking.

3. While her half helmet and goggles were part of her responsibility as a driver, he probably thought that chewing a lollipop while driving was bad etiquette. Or perhaps the fact that she carried the stick used for the sport known as ice hockey on her back seemed dangerous.

4. And most importantly—he was unable to comprehend the reason for the girl to be wearing a *yellow raincoat*. Incidentally, that morning had a bright and fair weather.

—These are all the options.

After the part-timer scrutinized her, he looked up to sky to check it. There was obviously no rain pouring down from the completely cloudless heavens.

The correct answer was... all four.

As the part-timer finally remembered to start his work, the girl asked him calmly.

"Does it really say Holland City in katakana here?^[1] What an unusual name."

The girl's tone was extremely overly-familiar and self-important. She actually fancied herself someone important, but that usually annoyed older people, and there were also times where people would pat her head. Because she had a baby face with a petite body as well as a high-pitched voice she apparently looked much younger than her true age of seventeen.

As expected the part-timer also smiled too much. Except for special circumstances where she wanted the other party to underestimate her, the girl loathed being treated like a child in her daily life.

"Oh, it used to be written in Kanji but when the regions around here were merged they changed it to katakana.^[2] So the name was not originally that strange. Have you come here from afar?"

He only inserted a little gasoline, or rather he was having difficulties regulating it. As the part-timer checked the meter being refilled his eyes glanced towards the Vespa's rear. A rolled-up sleeping bag was hanging from it.

"Yeah, I've been around a lotta places. A solitary journey and all that."

"A journey? In this day and age?"

"Is that weird?"

"...Ah, well, I dunno."

He probably did find it weird. Even if he told other people about a young girl wearing a raincoat and carrying a hockey stick who was journeying on a scooter they wouldn't believe him.

"Including me, there's a lot in the world you don't know about. Do remember that."

While the girl adjusted the position of her goggles, the clerk answered "sure" mixed with a wry smile. Perhaps he thought it was just a joke or that the girl was some eccentric under the influence of dangerous drugs—regardless, the girl herself was already used to such responses for a long time.

"Now then, I can already 'feel' it. But this whole story is a bit—*inconsistent*, though."

"Huh?"

"Just talking to myself. Thanks. Do your best working today as well!"

The girl driving the Vespa thanked him.

Leaving the gas station and returning to the national highway, she drove through the streets in full throttle. She pushed toward a certain direction based on the wave she could perceive.

What drew the girl was the life reaction of something other than human or another animal.

And it was a—

"Hmm, just like I thought, it appears to be a 'newborn' no matter how I look at it. And what's more, it's on a rampage."

Mushi.

These were strange beings that infested people in order to eat their desires of "doing this" or "becoming like this", meaning their "dreams", and in exchange granted them supernatural powers.

When the girl got off her Vespa and removed her helmet, a single boy was standing in front of her.

At a glance he seemed like the sort of young student one could find anywhere. However, some sort of white, sticky substance was glued to the body of this pale-faced boy. Obviously having lost his presence of mind and breathing laboriously, drops of fresh blood trickled from his hands.

—Mushi possessed adolescent boys and girls. Those possessed were called Mushitsuki and slowly had their dreams eaten.

It has been about ten years ever since the existence of Mushi began being whispered around. The government had officially declared them to be nonexistent, but rumors and eyewitness reports only kept increasing. At present the fear and discrimination toward Mushitsuki expanded to a scope that couldn't be ignored.

"Seems like you use mud as your medium. Have you replenished it from asphalt? Also, now that I see you don't have any external wounds, it means that blood isn't yours, right? Being unable to control your Mushi and start destroying anything that moves is a common symptom, but the real problem is—"

The girl mumbled while nibbling the candy in her mouth. The boy emitted strange sounds directed at her while putting both hands on the ground. The ground swelled and a white mass spurt out of it.

While looking at the countless white needles assaulting her, the girl casually drew the stick on her back.

"The problem is that you're a 'newborn' and a Special Type."

The girl's completely calm voice echoed from behind the Mushitsuki boy's back.

It happened in a split instant that didn't even reach a second.

In the short span of time that could even be called a nanosecond, the mass of white mud was split apart.

The girl had instantly moved more than ten meters and the Mushitsuki boy collapsed behind her.

"Recently I've heard from a friend that he'd defeated the being that gave birth to Special Types like you, so... what's the meaning of this? I don't think he lied. A Special Type Mushitsuki that shouldn't ever be born again exists now... That's really inconsistent..."

With her yellow raincoat fluttering, a purple electrical discharge was produced around the girl's limbs. Still shrouded in purple electricity, she retrieved the stick to her back.

"Also, I did this out of kindness. You shouldn't think of a blink of an eye as the standard. There are people with such overwhelming power who can settle everything even in that split instant, after all. —Well, work hard after you've been taken into custody by the proper agency."

The proper agency. Yes, there existed a place in this country that would capture the "nonexistent" Mushitsuki, take them into custody to isolate them, and even train and command them, depending on the case. That was the organization this girl belonged to.

She raised her goggles to her brows and gazed up the sky.

Was it a coincidence or fate?

She could also feel other powerful waves of Mushitsuki in this new land. It appeared she would have to stay in this city for a while not only to solve this mystery, but also to devote herself to her real work.

"You failed."

While nibbling her candy, she pointed at the collapsed boy with a finger.

Shishidou Inuko's "scouting" journey.

The place was Holland City.

—Start.

1.00 Shachito Part 1

"I can't stand this relationship anymore!"

The campus of Horanto^[3] Academy was a recreation of a 17th century Dutch-style building made of bricks.

The grey of the pointed roof created a beautiful contrast with the brown walls, and even the large gymnasium had a triangular roof as a special feature.

The roofed passageway connecting the school building to the gymnasium had no walls, so it was pressed between the courtyard and the sports ground.

During the spring the courtyard's flowerbeds would be decorated by tulips of all colors, but during the current season only a rectangle surrounded by mere bricks could be seen. The sports clubs were busy with their club activities on the sports ground.

The cold February wind blew through the wall-less corridor.

"I want to end it already."

Her long hair fanned by the wind, a female student clad in school uniform spoke. Judging from her expression, she seemed to be brooding over this matter.

"..."

On the other hand, the boy in front of her needed a bit of time to think.

Umm, this is—

He unconsciously sent his gaze around.

What kind of drama film is this...?

A boy and girl who were classmates; words that felt out of place; the campus illuminated by the setting sun after school.

It was the ideal situation to be part of a youth documentary or romantic drama shown on TV.

Yet there were no cameras around the two and obviously no director as well. The boy was also not an actor, as was the girl in front of him.

I want to end it already—

Since the girl in front of his eyes said this to him, she should have some reason for it. Something had supposedly started between them and she apparently wanted it to end.

He desperately fumbled around in his memories trying to recall it.

Yet nothing came to mind.

Because of that he asked her frankly.

"Umm, end what?"

A dry sound echoed through Horanto High School.

He only realized he had been slapped because he could see not the girl but the school clock. The force of her blow was apparently enough to rotate his neck by 90 degrees.

The girl was speaking of something to the boy standing stock still.

It was about him repeatedly acting suggestively toward her. As well as her dissatisfaction that despite this he was still flirting with other girls. There were also the cases where he'd gotten chocolate from someone who wasn't her on Valentine's day, and why hadn't he responded when she called out to him a few days ago? Weren't they supposed to be dating? And so forth.

"Say something, Shachito-kun!"

The girl shouted out these extremely unreasonable words. He wished for her to understand his position as someone who had suddenly been hit and given no time to speak back.

You watch too many dramas, he felt, but there was no way he could say that.

Horanto High School General Curriculum 2nd year student Shiohara Shachito thought of something completely different.

Ah, this is bad—

The numbness caused from the stimulus to his cheek gave rise to a strange feeling.

He could feel some sort of discomfort. There was no doubt about that.

However, he couldn't think of it as his. It was an indescribable feeling as if only the "pain" split from his body and flew to another dimension.

Furthermore, he felt as if the "pain" flying to another dimension was also trying to drag him over to "that side". What would happen if he simply yielded his body without resisting? While feeling these doubts—

"...No, umm."

He smiled wryly.

"It's a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding. It couldn't have been—geez, you really scared me. Uh, well, even if you think I've been acting suggestively toward you, I'm acting the same way with everyone. Well, I've been told I'm a universal flirt though..."

Shachito hurriedly explained himself. Even he himself didn't really understand what he was trying to say.

Because of his preemptive strike, even he was a bit confused. It was quite unlike him—it was all because of that different dimension or whatever that caused his thoughts to become all messed up.

This girl just seemed to have an excessively wrong impression and so hastily jumped to conclusions. As long as she realized it everything would be fine.

It's often said that you should talk out your problems... but what was I supposed to do after getting smacked by that surprised attack?

He had his doubts, but this wasn't the time to be thinking about them. If they could still talk out everything then he had to try talking as much as he could.

"And about the chocolates, there were plenty of other—oh, this isn't sarcasm, you see, It's because I received a lot of friend chocolates from my female acquaintances.^[4] ...Umm, I believe that I thought your chocolate was also like that and so I misunderstood you. Because you haven't really said anything."

He frantically dug through his memories and replied. He was at a loss for words in the middle due to him completely forgetting the name of the girl in front of him, but he wasn't enough of an idiot to actually tell her that.

He had been told "let's end it" by someone whose name he couldn't even recall and was then slapped. He was thankful from the bottom of his heart the first strike wasn't with a sharp object.

"The same way with everyone?"

Coming to her senses, the girl probably realized her misunderstanding. She was taken aback and cast her eyes downward.

Now that the situation has calmed down he finally recalled that this girl was his classmate and that she recently became someone whom he would speak with often. If he wasn't mistaken she was part of the brass band club.

From now on, whenever he came in contact with her he should remember that she'd seen too many dramas and was liable to hastily jump to conclusions. So he vowed in his heart.

"That's right. So calm down, okay? Having our relationship turn sour because of such a thing would be a waste, wouldn't it?"

While pacifying her with a grin, he suddenly noticed.

...Hmm? Is it possible my pacifism created this situation in the first place?

Giving it a good thought, it was probably so.

Due to his personality that allowed him to become friendly with anyone and his neat facial features, Shachito had plenty of friends regardless of gender. He also cherished his relationships with them more than anything.

And so his favorite motto was "treat every encounter as once in a lifetime".

He wanted to cherish his relationship even with someone who suddenly slapped him.

"So it was my misunderstanding... I'm sorry."

Raising her face, the girl gazed at Shachito intently. He noticed that her gaze was directed at his cheek.

He recalled and rubbed it.

"Ah—"

He shook his hand lightly so that she wouldn't worry for him.

"Don't mind it. This doesn't hurt one bit."

It actually didn't hurt. He wasn't even sure if the cheek he rubbed was the one that had been slapped.

He couldn't feel "pain"—

Judging by his common knowledge this was probably abnormal.

Shachito was like this since long ago, and he carried a much bigger problem, an extremely abnormal secret, anyway.

Also, having his sense of pain dulled posed no problem to him spending his days enjoyably.

"I'm just fine with pain."

Seeing Shachito speaking with a grin, the girl bit her lips.

—After parting with her, Shachito returned to his classroom to grab his bag.

"Oh, Shachi's back."

"Hey, where have you been?"

"You snuck outside after seeing some email... were you possibly called out by someone?"

He became the center of attention of his classmates all at once. They were his classmates from the go-home club or those that had already finished up their club activities and came back.

Behind their backs, the view outside the window was already growing dark. The dark glass window reflected the fluorescent lights inside, making Shachito's features stand out clearly.

He had thin eyebrows, slightly drooping, double-lidded eyelids, and a sharp-pointed chin. Wearing a coat on top of his uniform, his body seemed tall yet was slender, so there were times where he was mistaken for a girl from behind.

—No, it wasn't just from his back, since due to his androgynous facial features there were even times where he was told "you're tall for a girl" even when seen from the front.

"Mm..."

While retrieving his bag and half helmet from his locker, he tilted his head. How should he tell them about the event that took place in the passageway?

Explaining things as they happened was troublesome. He decided to smile and evade it.

"I just talked with someone I know. It was fun."

"It was fun, you say... but you're always having fun."

"Yeah, Shachi-kun's always smiling."

"Huh? I mean, it's fun."

He protested against his classmates' exasperated faces with a smile.

Surrounded by his many friends, there were no arguments whatsoever—except for being slapped today. Was there any other time as enjoyable as this to be spending his youth on?

"Huh, Shachi-kun, isn't your cheek a bit red?"

"Were you beat up? Did you have a fight? Lovers' quarrel?"

"No way. Since I'm all about love and peace there's no way I'd fight. And you know I'm not dating anyone right now, right?"

All at once the girls around raised a surprised voice.

"Eh, really? Weren't you on good terms with that girl from Class C?"

"Wasn't she from Class A? It became quite the topic among us girls."

"Oh, come on. It's not like I'm getting along only with girls... Why does the conversation always turn out like this? —Wait, argh! It's already this late!"

"Is this about helping that other class's band? Can you even play anything?"

"I'm just singing to the tune. It's mainly about cheering them on."

Showing a grin, Shachito left the classroom. Helping his friends who were

working hard on something was a natural part of his daily life.

Shachito's classmates exchanged farewells to see him off.

The usual scenery after school.

Chatting with his friends like always.

He was relieved to feel this natural moment. Because he was able to clearly feel that this was where he belonged.

He blended naturally into this natural scenery.

This was Shachito's established reality, and he was definitely part of it. That was why he loved school, and he also loved Holland City where he was born and raised.

"Well then, I have to hurry."

Leaving the front gate, Shachito wore his helmet. Since it was of the type that covered one's ears he could somewhat stave off the cold. Carrying his bag, he headed toward the parking area with a jog.

"Oh no, this is horrible."

Horanto High School allowed commuting to school by motorbike. Shachito's beloved ride, the So10, had two bicycles leaning on it from both sides. They probably belonged to students who hadn't left the school yet.

"Oh, c'mon..."

He tried pulling his motorbike from various angles, but the situation was unchanged. *Maybe I should just use "that power"*, was what passed through his mind, but he soon gave up. He had no intention to reveal the power he had been hiding for years over such a trifle.

As he continued his hard struggle he felt a gaze on him.

Turning around, he saw a girl glaring at his direction. She probably had frizzy hair, as several spots in her short hair casually stood up, catching his eyes. Her mouth was concealed by a checkered scarf.

In Horanto High School the color of one's tie differed by the year. From the color of her tie he knew she was a first-year. So she was one year his junior.

He currently had his hands full—he had the feeling he used the expression wrong, but anyway, it was that sort of situation. Shachito made a friendly grin so that he would appear to be a kind upperclassman.

"Helpme!"

Without any hesitation he called for help from this person that he had never met. The girl was taken aback and straightened her back.

"Y-ye!"

Along with this excited response she rushed at him, pulling the bicycle entangled with the motorbike. She looked so desperate that even Shachito who had asked her for help felt sorry.

"Ye?"

"I meant to respond 'yes'! H-how about this...? Maybe like this..."

"Ooh, amazing. Thankyou."

Thanks to her holding the other bicycles, Shachito was able to rescue his beloved motorbike. The underclassman girl replied with a dull "yes" as if embarrassed.

Looking at her again, the girl seemed shorter than his first impression of her. It was because of her long limbs. From her energetic movements he thought she might be part of some sports club, but her skin seemed too fair for that.

"Well then, I'll be going. I am in a hurry."

"In a hurry? So should I send you off as thanks?"

As he said this casually, the girl who was trying to leave turned around. Her puzzled face reflected on the curved gas tank.

"Is it fine for two people to ride on that?"

"No, it's not. Even though it looks like that it's a motor scooter after all. But it's fine, I've never been caught giving a ride to another person."

"So we can't. NO law-breaking!"

With an angry face, the girl crossed her hands in an X shape.

"Someday you will be caught and expelled, Shiohara-senpai."

"I don't think I'll really be expelled. ...Wait, how'd you know my name?"

"I know it. You are famous. You're the playboy Shiohara Shachito-senpai!"

"Heh, am I really famous?"

Making an embarrassed grin, he suddenly noticed what she said.

"—Wait... playboy?"

The smile on his face froze.

It was unthinkable. Absolutely unthinkable.

Wasn't this assessment of Shachito, who simply possessed an extensive range of acquaintances and enjoyed his one-in-a-lifetime youth, thoroughly messed up?

In a certain sense it was a larger shock than even that slap in the passageway.

"...? What's wrong, Shiohara-senpai? You're falling with your motorbike."

"Did you possibly think something like, 'ah, it's Shiohara-senpai the playboy!' when you saw me now like I was some rare animal?"

"Huh! Incredible, how did you know?"

Raising his face, he saw the underclassman girl whose arms still indicated the shape of an X take a step back.

She was clearly acting cautious.

"Umm, this is a misunderstanding. Huh, this is the exact same line I said earlier..."

"A-a misunderstanding, is it? I see."

"You don't see it at all. You're slowly trying to run away. ...Oh well, umm, goodbye."

"G-goodbye."

Quickly bowing her head, the girl ran away. Having even such an innocent underclassman be cautious of him probably meant the misunderstandings about Shachito spread through the entire school.

Today was an unlucky day.

If he were to think any deeper about this he would probably become depressed, so he decided to give up on it.

"Well, it's like that thing they say. A wonder lasts... lasts... how many days was it? Uh, never mind."

He equipped his goggles while muttering to himself. As he brought the motorbike to the school gate he started the engine. Its light purring echoed.

Taking off on his So1o, he cut into the roadway. The state of his beloved ride was passable today. Accelerating well, he advanced on the highway where cars went back and forth.

Feeling the cold February wind numb his cheeks, he looked at the mirror.

Seeing that his cheek was slightly red, he recalled being slapped by his classmate. Since he couldn't feel the pain, this swelling felt strange.



"Feeling no pain... that's definitely not normal."

Pain felt dull to him since long ago. He rubbed his cheek using his sleeve and then turned forward.

He only thought about his cheek for a second and it immediately vanished from his mind. He drove his motorbike, heading for a studio at the center of town. He should be able to arrive in a few minutes after entering the national highway that ran around Horanto High School.

Holland's dust townscape flowed to his back.

Passing by slow cars and evading those who cut in forcibly, he drove his beloved motorbike smoothly.

The scenery of Holland City where he was born and raised continued unchanged as it always was.

He could catch glimpses of the distant sea from between the gaps of the lines of buildings.

Now that night was approaching, the ocean was even darker than the sky. He could see the lights of tankers returning from the deep sea and the lamps of fishing vessels heading out to fish at night.

"Yeah yeah, I'm on my way."

Probably having received an email on his cellphone, Shachito felt a vibration from his pocket. It was probably from the friend he had arranged to meet.

He entered the national highway. The cars rushed through the double-lane roadway with great speed. Shachito brought his motorbike to the left lane, driving in full throttle.

At a place close to his destination he stopped in front of a traffic light, halting his So1o next to a pedestrian crossing.

He pulled the cellphone out of his pocket. Just like he thought the email was from his friend.

Putting the cellphone back, he grasped the throttle again in preparation for the green light.

Just as he saw the traffic light on the pedestrian crossing starting to blink, he could hear the sound of something crashing.

"Hmm?"

He shifted his gaze to the side. "Something" he had never seen before was approaching from the front of the national highway.

"What the hell... is that...?"

He muttered in shock. Shachito shouldn't have been the only one to doubt his eyes.

A ball of light—he could think of nothing but this clichéd expression to describe it.

The glittering orb rushed from the opposite lane. The cars coming in contact with it were sent spinning, crashing into one another, and their ruptured glass windows were absorbed into the shining sphere.

He wondered if this sight that lacked any sense of reality was from some movie.

But that was wrong. The people who were flung out of their cars collapsed while bleeding from their heads.

—*Bump*, his heart throbbed.

The identity of the light sphere became apparent as it grew closer with great speed.

In the center of the shining orb was a person wearing a full-face helmet riding on a large motorcycle. Surrounding this motorcycle was a cluster of fragments reflecting the neon lights—glass.

"N-no way—"

It was someone who could control a supernatural power that shouldn't exist in reality.

Shachito was perhaps the only person there to realize what sort of being this was when faced with this sight.

Why was he the only one able to guess what the deal with the full helmet

man was?

The answer to that lay in the secret he had been hiding for many years.

"Is this for real..."

The large motorcycle reflected in his goggles grew larger. Shachito started emitting sweat from his entire body and strongly clenched the handlebar.

He realized that the large motorcycle rider had the same "disposition" as him.

Even Shachito, when he had become like this, was assaulted by urges to go on a rampage due to unstable emotions. Yet he had been able to somewhat endure that.

The full helmet man was unable to endure – and so went on a rampage.

"N-no... nonono."

There were many victims. The large motorcycle that rushed while destroying cars around it didn't seem about to stop.

I might be able to stop him—

Such a thought rose to his mind. It was because Shachito was something close enough to the rider so that he was able to notice his true nature.

Yet he soon denied his own thoughts.

"It's useless no matter how I think about it."

He smiled wryly and hesitated about his next move.

He stopped his So1o on the side of the road. Since he was out of the large motorcycle's "path" he shouldn't be in any danger as long as he wouldn't do anything.

"Letting him pass is for the best—hmm?"

While wearing a pathetic smile, Shachito could see a bus in his back mirror.

"...!"

The bus stopped behind him. If it kept going ahead it would coincide with the large motorcycle's path.

Shachito became speechless because the girl holding a strap in front of the

passenger seats looked familiar.

It was the scarf girl who had helped him get out his motorbike from the parking area. She probably took this bus after parting with him.

—Well then, I'll be going. I am in a hurry.

He recalled the girl's smile when she refused his proposal to take her.

She was really cute. I should've asked for her name—

As thoughts completely irrelevant to the current situation rose to his mind, his body started moving of its own accord.

"I'm being called a playboy because I unconsciously think of such things...!"

Whoosh, Shachito's index and middle finger cut through the air.

His fingers pointed directly at the scheduled bus the girl was riding. The distance between them was probably just shy of 100 meters.

As he widened his eyes, orange shadows soared from the bus in front of his eyes as if bursting.

It wasn't just from the bus; a smoke-like luster rose the same way even from the cars parked around.

As the orange lights flew into air, they assembled a strange shape.

It was a creature with one compound eye on the front of its thin body and an orange rear—this appurtenance was similar to the dragonfly known as the Autumn Darter, yet unlike the real one it had eight sharp, flapping wings.

They only materialized for a second, instantly changing their form to orange rays of light. Leaving a glowing afterimage behind, they stabbed into the car right in front of the bus.

The large motorcycle passed next to Shachito.

He crossed gazes with the full helmet man for an instant—or so he felt.

The next moment, a loud sound echoed throughout the national highway.

The cluster of glass led by the large motorbike crashed into a car shining in orange and was blown away splendidly. As if it was tackled by a tank trucker.

"Whew..."

Seeing the large motorcycle roll over to the opposite lane and crash into a wall, Shachito exhaled.

As he raised his face to ascertain the safety of the bus, his shoulders were pulled away powerfully.

No; the thing being pulled wasn't his shoulders.

Shachito's consciousness was being severed by an intense gravitation.

His bodily senses were dulled and his vision distorted. Because of him releasing his powers for the first time in some years, he was assaulted by an exhaustion that scraped off his mind and body.

His consciousness on "this side" was being pulled to the mysterious world of "that side"—

"DAH!"

Yet Shachito shook his head and was somehow able to preserve his consciousness.

As he raised his head again, he could hear the high-pitched sound of glass rubbing against something.

The full helmet man that crashed into the wall rose up as if nothing happened to him. Scattered glass danced in air, creating a large form that resembled a living creature.

"So like I thought... you're 'the same' as me."

Beads of sweat covered Shachito's forehead rested on the handlebar.

The fine fragments of glass produced the form of a large insect several times larger than a human. Although its round body and small head resembled those of a scarab beetle, its massive, spread wings were sharp like saws. It was a nothing but a sphere of light earlier, yet it now changed completely, clearly possessing a will of its own, and it stuck its thick legs onto the surrounding ground.

The strange monster made of glass turned its body toward Shachito. Since his

body was shrouded in an orange glow by the usage of the ability, the monster apparently regarded him as an enemy.

Mushi—

There were rumors about these beings that fed on people's dreams all over the country and Holland City was no exception. Yet in contrast to the big cities where there were plenty of eyewitness reports, in this area it was nothing more than an urban legend. Adolescent boys and girls found it amusing, but the rumor was being passed around with clear fear.

Those possessed by Mushi were named Mushitsuki and in exchange for them becoming able to use supernatural abilities, the Mushi possessing them would eat their dreams.

That was about all the knowledge the boys and girls of Holland City had about Mushi.

And the Mushitsuki in question—Shiohara Shachito, was also no exception to this.

"Umm... you're the one at fault for going on a rampage without caring about anything around you, right?"

He had no idea what to say, so for now he showed a friendly grin. Since he had used his powers without thinking of the consequences the fatigue made him run out of steam.

"Even someone like me wouldn't want to make friends with someone like you. Since you probably feel the same let's just forgive and forget. Okay?"

The full helmet man pulled up his collapsed large motorcycle. Revving up the engine again, he accelerated toward Shachito without looking to the sides.

"W-wait a minute! I told you I don't wanna fight!"

It didn't look like he was going to talk with him. The large motorbike crossed over the lane and approached.

"...Gaah! At least listen to me!"

Shachito hurriedly turned the throttle. Sliding on the rear wheel, he changed his course.

His motorbike's engine displacement was different from that of his opponent's. It was obvious that even if he escaped on the national highway the full helmet man would immediately catch up to him.

He rushed up onto the sidewalk away from the now-noisy intersection, and then, weaving his way between buildings, he leapt into a narrow backstreet.

The large motorcycle was unconcerned. He chased after Shachito while using the glass Mushi to destroy the walls around.

"This can't be happening right...? Why do I—"

Have to be chased by a monster!

He was about to shout this out, but then recalled he was also a Mushitsuki and so held his tongue. Finding an illuminated street corner, he operated the handlebar while pulling on the emergency break.

As Shachito slid on his rear wheel while turning at the corner, the large motorcycle behind him crashed into the wall of a building. Yet even while causing horrible sounds of destruction, the other man soon changed his course and came after Shachito.

—He had a premonition.

And it was because of him hiding his abilities ever since becoming a Mushitsuki a few years ago.

If people knew he was a Mushitsuki—no, if he acknowledged he was a Mushitsuki, he felt as if he would have to part from his everyday life. Something like Mushi couldn't exist in reality after all.

And it wasn't just that.

The power of a Mushitsuki, at least for Shachito, was akin to magical energy.

When he used that power he felt as if he was becoming a different person. It was a strange feeling, as if some unseen stranger was pulling at his shoulders. Fearing this, Shachito had never turned around to look at "that side". He didn't even want to know who was trying to pull him away.

Although he normally didn't think of anything and lived irresponsibly, there was one thing he wanted to keep doing.

That was not using his power as a Mushitsuki.

"This isn't a joke... I'm...!"

It wasn't too late.

Knocking off a bucket, he pulled on the emergency brake. He curved his motorbike again while sparks were emitted from the muffler scraping the ground.

He decided to escape from the monster chasing after him and forget about the whole thing. He would reach his destination later than planned but return to his normal life as if nothing ever happened.

Shachito right now should have no other choice—

"—An excellent choice."

While he took the turn, a cheerful smile suddenly closed in on him.

The other person probably took the same turn like him from the alley on the opposite side. As Shachito thought next to him was another motorbike dragging on the ground and scattering sparks.

It was a Vespa; a foreign-made scooter just like Shachito's So10.

He was also surprised at this sudden development, but found himself more confused by the rider's bizarre appearance.

Since her face was hidden by a half-helmet and goggles, he was unable to see anything except for her mouth distorted by a smile. However, Shachito could tell at a glance that this girl, who seemed to be around his age, was wearing yellow rain gear—a raincoat. In addition she wore rubber boots, carried a hockey stick on her back, and had a lollipop in her mouth.

A girl with this unrealistic getup appeared in this extreme situation. The raincoat girl reflected in Shachito's eyes looked—

Like a "traveller".

Since she was clad in a raincoat and had a lollipop instead of a reed in her mouth, if only she wore a sandogasa^[5] as well she would appear like some traveller from a period drama.

"Getting away from the national highway filled with people... yup, that's the correct answer. It's standard to minimize the amounts of damage when you have to 'fight'. I can also praise you for choosing tight turns around alleys after seeing your opponent exceeds you in maximum speed."

The girl spoke while being perfectly synchronized with Shachito as he kept zigzagging through alleys. Never mind Shachito desperately running away, the girl didn't even seem to be worried about the monster giving chase from behind.

"Huh? Your face seems to say 'I have no intention of fighting at all!' though... How strange, have I misunderstood you? But that can't be, after all you're—"

The nature of the girl's smile changed.

"—A Mushitsuki, right?"

Shachito was assaulted by a shudder. An irresistible fear much like having the grim reaper's scythe around his neck crawled up his spine.

"It's useless even if you hide. Because you're a Mushitsuki you can't run away from your destiny to 'fight'."

The girl's tone was light, but that made her words all the more ominous.

"Well, it's probably too sudden for you, but I have two things to tell you about this current situation. The first one is—I'm sorry, I actually intended of taking care of him myself but I ended up letting him get away. He was surprisingly fast, you see."

"Huh?"

As Shachito widened his eyes, the girl's Vespa suddenly decelerated and she was left behind.

"The second is that I ran outta gas. I'm leaving the rest to you, so do your best."

"Ah, wait!"

Losing its speed, the Vespa ended up stopping. As a consequence the girl became the prey of the monster pursuing from behind, vanishing along with the asphalt breaking to pieces.

"...!"

Shachito's blood froze through his entire body.

No way she just died—were his idiotic thoughts. There was no way a flesh-and-blood human could live through the sort of impact that destroyed even cars.

Death.

Only now the danger to his life felt real. This wasn't even the time to be thinking about returning to his normal life; at least he would just be crushed without anything remaining just like that Vespa girl.

Fear dazzled his eyes and he couldn't breathe well. He could only hear his heart beating and his teeth chattering.

Since his body was completely paralyzed, he wasn't able to avoid a puddle of water. His rear wheel slid on it, and he hurriedly tried to correct his posture, but his speed plummeted.

A fragment of the asphalt destroyed by the Mushi behind him hit Shachito's temporal region.

As his vision shook due to the impact, he could feel *it* slightly—yet clearly.

Shachito widened his eyes.

What he felt only for an instant, like a drop falling on the surface of water.

That was—"pain".

He felt as if someone suddenly pulled his shoulders.

As fear reached its peak inside him, Shachito felt as though someone was tearing off his personality from his physical body. As if another personality was being forcibly stuffed inside him instead—

"..."

—The one who had made Shachito into a Mushitsuki was an old man clad in a filthy robe.

He had no idea who that old man was.

He felt like he had spoken about something with that old man that abruptly appeared in front of him. However, his memories from the time were vague and so he couldn't clearly remember it. When he came to himself, the old man was already gone and "something" other than Shachito himself inhabited his body.

It was a Mushi.

In exchange for devouring his mind, it gave him a power he couldn't care less about.

At the same time, Shachito lost a certain sensation ever since that day.

"Pain".

The sensation that Shachito would feel when he was hurt had been left behind somewhere.

Even so it didn't disrupt his daily life, so Shachito decided to pay no heed to that and forget he was a Mushitsuki.

As long as it didn't hinder his peaceful student life, he didn't need even this "pain".

Or so he thought.

However—

"...So was it on 'that side'?"

Touching his forehead, he could feel lukewarm blood with his hand. There were the sensation of red blood and some heat, but the "pain" was already gone.

Yet he clearly felt it just now.

—Shachito turned around.

As he turned his head while still being pulled by something mysterious, he could see the Mushitsuki whose face was hidden by the full-face helmet in front of him.

The "pain" he had felt for the first time in years...

He was able to feel it during this extreme situation, but for some reason—

Shachito was assaulted by an urge to regain it no matter what.

"...Give it back."

As Shachito murmured this, an orange radiance leapt from his body.

The shadow gushing out of Shachito and his So1o took the shape of an Autumn Darter for an instant. It then returned being orange light, stabbing into the large motorcycle behind in the speed of light.

"...!"

He could tell the full helmet man was agitated. His motorcycle's tires warped and he rapidly decelerated. The Mushi made out of a cluster of glass had its weight increased and sank into the ground.

Making use of the recoil, Shachito raised the front wheel of his So1o. When the rotating tire touched the wall of a building, the motorcycle fluttered in air while still advancing ahead.

The full helmet man's response came with a delay when confronted with this impossible scene. Shachito climbed up the wall, rotated once and leapt above the man's head.

While still floating, Shachito's fingertips cut the air. An Autumn Darter flew out of the large motorcycle he pointed at, instantly travelling to Shachito and his So1o.

A tremor shook the dark alley.

Clashing from the front, Shachito's So1o smashed both the glass Mushi and the large motorcycle together. After cutting the Mushi into two, the spot where the So1o has landed created large cracks on the ground.

The cluster of glasses dispersed and the full helmet driver was blown away.

Shachito stopped his So1o with the high-pitched sound of the brakes. Immediately afterwards, the orange glow left the motorbike and Shachito as if melting into thin air.

"...Hihah."

A light smile rose to Shachito's mouth as he got off his motorbike. He

approached the collapsed full helmet man.

"Hey, do you have a moment? Is this a good time for you? Say, do you happen to know where my 'pain' is?"

Still sporting a huge grin, he kicked the completely unmoving man. Since there was no response he kicked him again.

Did he not move no matter how much he was kicked due to a lack of "pain"? Did this mean everyone who became a Mushitsuki felt no pain just like Shachito? Or perhaps he did feel pain but since he didn't want to return it to Shachito he stayed silent?

Since he didn't know the answer he kept kicking.

Even though his forehead was still bleeding, he could feel no pain.

"Say something, will you? Hellooo?"

As Shachito kept kicking him mechanically, he heard a familiar voice from behind.

"Do stop that. He already lost his Mushi and became a Fallen."

As he turned around, a purple glow passed through his field of vision.

"He was just a 'newborn' that went on a rampage. You seem to be different, though."

"...!"

As Shachito turned around he heard the continuation of these words from even further behind him—from next to the collapsed large motorcycle.

He reflexively jumped back, putting himself on guard. The smile was gone from his face.

Approaching him at some point, a single girl stood nearby.

The raincoat fluttering in the dark back alley emitted purple electricity. Her mouth with a lollipop inside it showed a relaxed smile. He could hear her rubber boots rubbing on the ground.

It was undoubtedly the girl that he thought to have been killed by the glass Mushi. He couldn't see her scooter around, but her unhurt figure was the exact

same as before.

An orange Autumn Darter flew out of Shachito's body. Since she was someone unknown to him she might also be an enemy.

While Shachito concentrated so that he could activate his ability at any time, the girl removed her helmet and goggles.

"I watched the whole thing. Your ability uses weight—or rather mass as a medium, right?"

In contrast to her self-important way of speaking, the girl's uncovered face looked young. He couldn't tell if she was younger than him or simply had a baby face. If not for the bizarre combination of a raincoat and a hockey stick, perhaps she would have looked cute.

"But it seems like there are some rules to it. You can't simply increase or decrease mass. So do you 'transfer' it with your Mushi? Controlling it seems difficult, but it's an extremely rare type of ability."

"..."

Having his ability seen through, Shachito naturally became warier.

It was just like the girl said.

His ability was to transfer the mass of objects. He could control it at will in the range his ability could reach, but the more he increased his range the more mental and physical energy he exhausted. He could also amplify or reduce mass to a certain extent, but doing just that wouldn't be any useful.

"However, more importantly..."

The girl reequipped her goggles and lowered her body.

Here it comes—

Shachito felt goosebumps on his entire body. He instantly leapt to the side.

"You sure are 'broken' in a convenient way."

He had no idea what happened next.

The spot he was standing in just a moment before now had large cracks running through it. That was the only thing he could comprehend. If he hadn't

reflexively evaded, he might have been ripped into two along with the ground.

"You seem to be in some sort of trance due to your state of extreme tension, but even so—your speed of response to an enemy is outstanding."

As he turned to look at the direction he heard the voice from, he widened his eyes.

The girl shrouded in purple electricity stood vertically on a wall. Her raincoat was fluttering and her hands grasped the hockey stick she had drawn from her back at some point.

As a result of her standing on the wall as if it was natural, Shachito felt as if he was the one standing sideways. His sense of balance was disrupted and he stood still without thinking.

When had she moved there?

How was she standing on the wall?

She surpassed the extent of Shachito's understanding—

"You have the makings to become a warrior."

The figure of the girl clearly asserting this disappeared.

The girl's hockey stick instantly approached and struck Shachito's chest. Feeling an impact, his body was thrust backwards.

However—

"Hihah!"

A broken smile rose to his face.

He reached with his right hand to grab the girl's head. —Since Shachito felt no pain, he also lacked fear toward taking damage. Although there was an overwhelming gap in their powers, he had no intention of being defeated so easily.

He felt a slight stimulus on his chest hit by the hockey stick.

The "pain" reborn amidst battle gradually exalted Shachito.

The more he fought the more he would be able to retrieve his "pain"—

He was convinced of this.

"Hmm, although I went easy on you, you didn't even move an eyebrow, huh. Are you perhaps unable to feel pain? You become increasingly more unique."

Even though her head was being grabbed, the girl stayed calm.

Shachito was convinced of his victory. He could just change the girl's weight, hurl her high in the air and let her crash into the ground.

The moment after Shachito thought this, the one blown away from behind was none other than himself.

"...!"

The girl shouldn't have been able to make a single move. And no one was behind him either.

As he crashed into the wall, Shachito was unable to evade the next attack.

"It's been a long time since an amateur Mushitsuki was able to touch me."

The girl's smile along with purple electricity approached from the front.

An impact completely incomparable to before shot through Shachito. It pierced through his body and crushed the wall behind him to pieces.

It had nothing to do with pain; he could feel he was forcibly being made to lose his consciousness.

Now that he slumped and fell to his knees, Shachito finally came to his senses.

Just before he blacked out he could see a glimpse of the full helmet man collapsed on the ground.

Have I... done that?

How had he been able to do such a thing?

How had he defeated him?

He couldn't understand what was happening to him.

"That Mushitsuki who used glass as a medium... since you killed his Mushi he became a Fallen—a state like a living corpse that lost all emotions and heart. Do relax, I won't kill your Mushi. You won't become a Fallen."

She apparently noticed his gaze. The girl spoke calmly.

Yet by the time he heard the explanation, Shachito was already thinking of something completely different.

What came to his mind was the underclassman girl riding the bus. The girl that helped him retrieve his motorbike after school. Shachito tried uncharacteristically helping her and so used his ability in order to save the bus she had been riding on.

She seemed to be hurrying somewhere... has she made it on time?

Just before his body succumbed to the drowsiness unaccompanied by any pain, he saw the figure of a girl pointing at him.

"You passed."

His greatest misfortune in this unlucky day...

Was being discovered by this raincoat-clad warrior.

Shiohara Shachito's "screening test"...

—Passed.

1.01 The Others

Looking down on the nightscape of Holland City from the height of several dozen meters above the ground, he was reminded of his nostalgic second home of New York.

This was obvious in the modernized townscape, but the fishing ships and tankers in the wide sea were also brimming with lights. This place probably developed this far by the land being blessed with the convenient location of the sea and river.

The circular lights he could see from afar belonged to the all-weather dome stadium that just finished its repairs. Adjacent to it were tourist sites reconstructing the era of trading with the Netherlands. Classic-style windmills and a trading ship floating in an artificial pond could be seen illuminated by floodlights.

All united by the dome, they were part of the theme park known as Oranje Land—"The Orange Land". Orange was the symbolic color of Holland.

His line of sight overlooking the nightscape was naturally drawn to the edges of Oranje Land. In a palace that was noticeably large even among the Oranje Land facilities he could see the "Concertgebouw". It was used both as a theater and as a concert hall, and it would be completely filled by an audience in a few weeks' time.

"Mister Harissi."

The one who called his name in English was his attendant manager.

Standing in the front of the group walking through the corridor of the high-rise building, Jarre Harissi turned around. His blue eyes turned from Holland City's nightscape to the overly thin suit-wearing Caucasian man.

"These are the profiles of the children who passed through the first

examination. Here."

"Thank you."

He received the copies of resumes with a mild smile. The letters written on the covers consisting dozens of pages were the English translation added by the staff.

As Jarre proceeded in the corridor, he found a billboard in front of him.

"Auditions for the musical *Beast*" was written side by side in both Japanese and English along with an arrow.

According to the staff, the applicants have already gathered in the hall. It would be rude to make them wait with all their tension. Jarre quickened his pace.

The glass-sided wall reflected his figure along with the night view.

As someone born in South America, his large body towered over the staff walking in a line by a head. Although he approached the end of his thirties, his muscular body and the beard covering his chin were still in good shape. The buttons of his suit seemed too tight.

Even in Japan there should be plenty of people to know the name of Jarre Harissi.

After being selected in the tryouts for a musical at South America, he became known among the famous actors and related people of Broadway. With his large body used for large-scale dance moves and his heavy bass voice used for songs as his weapons, he was able to perform the main role of many musicals despite his lack of experience, and even received famous awards.

Yet as the musicals he performed in closed their curtains one after another, he lost his weapon known as youth and consequently also his place in Broadway.

At present, he hanged up his past awards and worked mainly on training actors and discovering talent. He received many offers from theater companies overseas, just like what caused him to come to Japan. Among those Jarre had "scouted" thus far there were also people who reached Broadway.

"Hmm, they're all making great faces."

Inside the resumes were pictures of the children brimming with dreams and hopes.

Although he was far from his past days of glory, he could feel some meaning in his current job. These children, a treasury of talent, overlapped with his past self that used to admire the brilliant Broadway. Just this made meeting up with them and watching over their growth enjoyable.

Since he had retired from active work, scouting and training young talent could be said to be his mission in life.

However—

"...Fufu."

He smiled wryly while looking at the window. In complete contrast to the pictures in his hand he could see his own ripened self.

Unable to fully give up on performing in Broadway again, even now he kept training his body.

"There's nothing as pitiful as a stubborn old soldier..."

He wore a self-derisive smile without thinking.

"What?"

One of the Japanese staff members tilted his head.

"Ah... no, this is nothing."

His shameful monologue had been overheard. Jarre smiled wryly and shook his head.

A cellphone's ringtone echoed.

"An accident? The time has already been decided though... I will try asking Mr. Jarre just to be sure."

One of the Japanese staff that held the phone spoke about something with Jarre's manager. The manager then turned to him.

"Mister Harissi. The applicant of resume number 92 would be late due to

apparently being involved in a traffic accident. What do we do?"

"Are they safe?"

"The person herself contacted us, so there should be no problems. However, prolonging the time of the interview more than the schedule permits would be a bit..."

"Wouldn't it be a pity to crush her chance like that? And it's not like I'll give her special treatment just because of the accident. Can you tell them that at the very least I don't mind?"

As Jarre smiled, the staff member that heard his answer through the manager also smiled. He conveyed his consent to the person on the other side of the phone.

Even though the formal exam was meant to test these young people, they should all be given fair chances.

Jarre's consistent thinking made him known as a man of character to everyone involved. Although his exams were harsh, he would never forgive unfairness and compromise.

"...?"

It happened for some reason when he was about to open up the resume of the number said by the staff member.

Jarre's vision suddenly distorted. He stopped in place without thinking.

He felt as if he could hear a strange sound from somewhere. A sound much like something hitting thick metal resounded awfully near his ear.

He grimaced, feeling as if something stirred up the inside of his head.

"Is something the matter?"

"What was that sound just now? That horrible, grating sound."

Feeling dizzy, he shook his head. His face, that caused him to be jokingly called bear man, lion man and names like that even when he didn't do anything, twisted in a scowl.

The staff members have apparently not heard that sound. They shrugged in

wonder.

There's no way they couldn't hear such a loud sound—

Jarre wanted to say this, but was interrupted by one of the staff raising their voice.

"Is that really fine?"

"What is?"

"I am talking about the matter just now. Are you really allowing that girl to not show up on time?"

A faint smile rising to his face, the man spoke in a sinister tone. The other staff members were startled and they all turned their heads toward him.

Jarre knit his eyebrows. He exchanged words with this man a few times, but had never seen him make that sort of face. He turned his back to the man and kept walking again.

"Stop beating around the bush. I admit these to be unusual measures, but this isn't any special treatment."

"You might regret it."

"Why?"

"You might be afraid of it."

"Me? Of what exactly?"

The man's persistent words were incredibly grating to his ears. The other staff members tried stopping him, but it didn't seem like he would back down.

"Of young talent."

"...!"

Jarre widened his eyes and turned around. Being stared by Jarre, the man's shoulders shook. With a surprised expression he looked around the faces of the other staff members.

"What sort of nonsense have I...!"

He could see something like a black haze separating from the man who

seemed to come to his senses.



It was probably just some weird shadow—thinking this, Jarre faced forward again and hastened his walking.

"Come on, look at this. Has she not been doing her best?"

Looking at the resume he had been told about earlier, he saw the picture of a girl with a somewhat tense countenance. Checking her history, he found out that apart from belonging to a theatrical company she also took ballet lessons and even classes for Conversational English.

"And it's not just this girl; this world is overflowing with wonderful talent."

Thinking of these children's hope-filled future, Jarre smiled.

What should he be jealous of?

Jarre had already retired from active work. Even if he was about to give hope to these children he was going to test now, it wasn't anything that should pain him.

One of the children that appeared in these resumes was about to be scouted and trained by him.

"I look forward to raising them so much I can't help it."

Horanto Academy first-year student, Masaki Rio.

That name was written next to the photo of a girl who had frizzy hair as her special feature.

1.02 Inuko Part 1

Returning the hockey stick to her back, the girl grinned.

"I can't wait to raise you."

Looking down at the boy collapsed at her feet, she was satisfied at her unexpected harvest.

"Seems like I'm not gonna be bored while I'm here."

Silence returned to the gloomy alley.

Smoke rose from the destroyed large motorcycle, and the man wearing a full-face helmet lying next to it made no move.

Next to the other boy who was also unmoving was the collapsed motorbike known as a So1o. With its body toppled over, the engine stopped and its front wheel was spinning idly.

"Having me coach you means you have good luck. Do look forward to tomorrow."

She puffed her chest, which was moderate compared to her age, toward the unconscious boy.

Although she had been to many towns, there were very few times she happened across this much talent. His ability to control the mass of objects went without saying, and the balance of his mind was ideal.

Normally he wouldn't be able to bear it.

Yet he couldn't continue winning against this abnormal mental state.

Being "half-broken" was ideal.

—All in order to make him into a combatant that would never lose.

"Uh-huh, so you're Shiohara Shachito. What a strange name. Ah, and I'm

burrowing this. I have no gasoline money anymore."

She pulled out the boy's wallet and used his license to confirm his name. And she swiped off only one bill.

"Have fun there. I still have a small job to do."

She returned the wallet to his pocket and wore her goggles again.

"Having two Special Type Mushitsuki being born in this city in so short a time... It's already a state of emergency. It's certainly a rare situation, but I know one thing for sure."

Leaving an afterimage behind, the figure of the smiling girl disappeared from the back alley.

"The Prototype Mushi that gives birth to Special Type Mushitsuki—*Shinpu*, is unmistakably in this city."

As the girl talked to herself, she was already looking down the scenery of Holland City from the sky.

Soaring up more than 10 meters in an instant, she landed on a building's roof. The yellow raincoat fluttered behind her. The hockey stick on her back and the helmet hanging from her neck generated an electrical discharge.

"Why does *Shinpu*, whom my friend had supposedly defeated, still exist? I, the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau Central Headquarters' Rank 3 member *Asagi*—Shishidou Inuko, must investigate this."

Inuko muttered this in a somewhat performative tone on top of a water tank. A belligerent smile rose to her lollipop-filled mouth.

Inuko closed her eyes behind the goggles and concentrated.

As she cut off her sense of sight, the townscape of Holland City immediately spread behind her eyelids. Yet the shape of this view was somewhat different from the real city; perhaps it could be said to be similar to an image created through thermography.

But the shape of the image Inuko could perceive was not through difference of temperatures.

What she could sense were "magnetic fields".

Inuko's ability, becoming a sensor of the strength of magnetism, perceived the location of an abnormal magnetic field.

"—Found you."

Opening her eyes wide, she looked down at one corner of the city.

It was a certain building sandwiched between several highways. She found a black shadow disappearing to the other side of the wall there.

As a reaction to Inuko's ability, sand from the ground rose up. These grains that had some iron in them—meaning iron sand, created the form of the butterfly known as a Chestnut Tiger, sparkling by the reflection of neon lights.

The next moment, Inuko teleported to the rooftop of the next building over.

Swoosh, with a sound of cutting through air, Inuko leapt further to another building. Her afterimage shrouded in purple electricity was moving toward the alley where the black shadow had disappeared.

On a building's rooftop, on a wall, on the top of a power pole, on the roof of a running car, on top of a mailbox.

Inuko moved hundreds of meters in the blink of an eye.

Shishidou Inuko's power as a Mushitsuki took "magnetism" as a medium. By either becoming a mass of magnetism herself or by manipulating magnetic objects, she would make herself and metals be pulled toward each other. At times she could even repulse.

A city that had plenty of iron in it, such as the bars of a building's framework or water pipes buried underground, served as Inuko's playground. With the laws of physics, she would create electrical discharges while moving inside these abnormal magnetic fields, but her insulated raincoat protected her from being shocked.

Moving at speeds the residents walking back and forth couldn't even perceive, Inuko pursued the black shadow.

"It's finally the time of reckoning for you, *Shinpu*."

While repeating her teleportation, Inuko concentrated in preparation for battle.

"If you want to blame anything at all, it has to be your own foolishness for giving birth to me—as well as your back luck that led my grown self to this city."

—There was an organization known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau.

This government agency devoted itself to handling the "nonexistent" (per the official stance) Mushi by capturing, concealing or isolating them. Commonly called the SEPB, they undertook any and all problems related to Mushi. Except for the Central Headquarters, the other branches monitored and controlled the entire country.

As Mushitsuki's abilities were wide-ranging, there were many times when ordinary firearms couldn't stand up to them. The decision taken by the SEPB was to manage the captured Mushitsuki, raising them to become soldiers through training.

Fight fire with fire.

Meaning they used Mushitsuki to capture Mushitsuki.

"So you've noticed me. Trying to run away, huh?"

Wearing her goggles again, Inuko raised the speed of her movements even further. A belt of purple electricity broke through a dark alley on the side of the road. This speed was enough to ruin her eyes by the air resistance if she hadn't worn her goggles.

For the last few years, the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau had secured and built their power inside the country. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they currently possessed enough firepower to rival even the JSDF.

And that meant that the numbers of Mushitsuki were increasing.

Mushitsuki kept multiplying.

"—Found ya!"

Inuko's field of vision perceived a retreating black figure turning in the alley in front of her.

The Special Environmental Preservation Bureau had confirmed the existence of the three designated as Prototype Mushi, beings that gave birth to Mushitsuki.

The first was *Oogui*. She greedily craved the dreams of boys and girl and thus kept increasing the numbers of Mushitsuki. There were many to become Mushitsuki after coming in contact with *Oogui*, who took the appearance of a human female. Since those who became Mushitsuki through her were able to control Mushi that possessed a form operated independently from them, they were called Minion Types.

Meanwhile, in complete opposition to *Oogui* was the one who barely made any appearances at all, *Sanbikime*. It was yet to be established what sort of form it took, but those who had been turned into Mushitsuki by it became Fusion Types. They were the kind that exhibited their abilities through merging with their Mushi.

And the remaining Prototype Mushi was what Inuko was chasing after right now—

"I never forgot that black robe."

As Inuko teleported to a street corner, a fluttering, filthy robe passed in front of her.

Since it had gone into a different road, she could see it only for an instant. Yet she would never mistake that robe by sight.

Inuko was a Special Type Mushitsuki. The type of Mushitsuki whose Mushi didn't materialize and instead used something else as a medium for its abilities.

The one who gave birth to Mushitsuki like Inuko was the Prototype Mushi known as *Shinpu*. Although he didn't appear frequently, he kept giving birth to Mushitsuki. His most distinctive feature was the black robe he wore.

No one could tell when and where these Prototype Mushi would appear.

It has been approximately ten years ever the existence of Mushi started being rumored around. Even the SEPB seemed to have given up on annihilating the Prototype Mushi, whose identity was yet to be found out even after all these months and years.

Yet Inuko was different.

No, as long as one was a Mushitsuki they probably all thought the same.

They would never forgive the ones who cast the deadly curse known as Mushi on them—

"...!"

Chasing after the black robe in a straight line, she finally caught up to it in an alley.

The moment she thought this, Inuko's vision was enveloped by a blinding light.

After passing through the back alley she found herself in front of the shopping district. With lines of buildings around, the front of an especially tall building was a plaza. There were many suits-wearing adults and students on the way back from school around.

"Oh no—"

A black piece of cloth rose from within the crowds of people. That cloth, shaped like a filthy robe, rose above the people's head and dispersed as if melting into thin air.

The magnetic field was being erased—

Inuko scowled.

The magnetic fields would become disordered in the presence of many people. Also, Inuko's sensing ability wasn't searching for the Mushi itself; she perceived the waves induced by Mushitsuki abilities. She could use her ability to sense one's location, but if the disarranged magnetic field returned to how it was then tracking it was impossible.

"...So both of us haven't forgotten, huh. I was too impatient so I've forgotten... since I know *Shinpu*, he also obviously knows about my abilities."

This was clearly the result of him making use of the blind spot of Inuko's ability. As long as Shinpu didn't use his abilities again—until the moment he gave birth to a new Mushitsuki, she would probably be unable to perceive his wave.

Seeing the girl who was wearing a raincoat put a hand to her forehead and gaze at the night sky, passersby turned their heads in wonder. They all looked above, but there were obviously no signs of rain.

"This time I've fallen behind. But remember this, *Shinpu*. Next time I'll—"

"Hyau!"

"Gofbh!"

Just as she tried showing off while talking to herself, she was tackled by a girl that came out flying from the crowd.

"I-I-I'm sorry! Excuse me! Are you all right?"

The one who bumped into her was a girl with frizzy hair. She wore a duffle coat on top of a blazer of some high school's uniform.

"Ah, it dropped..."

The force of the other girl's shoulders hitting her solar plexus caused the lollipop to be expelled out of her mouth. She hurriedly felt around her pockets and brought out a new one. If she didn't have *this* Inuko would've been in trouble.

"D-dropped? There are no raindrops, it's fine!^[6] Oooh, you meant your candy, I'm sorry, I'll repay you!"

"Thank you for that. But don't worry about it, this is a special product that can't be bought anywhere. Leaving that aside, it was a nice tackle."

"C-can't be bought anywhere?! Is it some limited edition?"

The girl kept acting exaggeratedly surprised without calming down.

"Now, now, do calm down first. By the way, have you seen some suspicious-looking individual around here? I believe he looks like an old man."

Shinpu's face hidden by the hood was similar to an old man's. Since she had nothing to lose Inuko tried inquiring the girl.

"Hmm, I don't think I have..."

As she feared, the girl shook her head.

Since Inuko had imagined this response, she wasn't particularly disappointed. Yet she could feel something amiss from the girl in front of her, and gazed at her intently.

Isn't this girl's wave... a bit upset?

The fact that she acted with a delay and bumped into her was also because of that.

Yet it wasn't rare for the magnetic fields she could feel from normal people to be more distraught than during normal times. It would slightly vary when their physical condition deteriorated or when their mental condition was a mess.

"You seem to be out of breath. Do you feel anything strange? You seem to have a wave I've never perceived before."

"Wave...? Oh, if you're talking about me being out of breath, it's because I was running here in a hurry—AHHH!"

Apparently recalling something, the girl widened her eyes.

"E-excuse me! I am in a great hurry! The audition is...!"

"Sorry for holding you back. Do be careful to not get into any accident."

"It's fine! I was in an accident just now after all!"

Lowering her head, the girl ran away.

Looking at the direction she had come from Inuko understood. It was the same direction as the highway where the Mushitsuki she had let escape fought with the So1o boy. The other girl had probably also been involved in that danger.

She was glad to see that girl was safe.

Inuko had no intention to involve a girl who lived a completely different life while keeping her dreams in her chest in the battle of Mushitsuki.

She pulled out her cellphone, pushing in the number she had memorized. She moved to the side of the road.

"Please confirm there is no third party in a radius of 10 meters and state your member code."

Hearing the voice on the other side, Inuko knitted her eyebrows. She mouthed her assigned member code.

"Member code confirmed. Comparing voice print. —Finished. Switching over to the internal communication channel."

"..."

"This is the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau's Central Headquarters' information management division. Starting now the conversation will be voice recorded under the personal records of Central Headquarters member, Irregular Class Rank 3 *Asagi*. Please state the required information."

"What happened to *C*? My phone was supposed to have been connected to her even inside the information division."

"Concurrently with her reassignment as Secret Class Rank, *C* was transferred from the information management division to another duty."

"Where's her new team? I heard that *Fuyuhotaru* escaped from Central Headquarters last week... Does it have anything to do with that? Could I speak with her?"

"At present, any information related to *C* can only be revealed to those on the rank of branch director or above. It is also prohibited for members to get in contact with her."

"Hmm. By the way, how much time will it take you to use your abilities to interfere with the main database and draw out information? I want to know anything I can about *Shinpu* with the authority of a Rank 3. *C* would have done it in several seconds though."

"...The expected required time is 27 hours."

"You lack training, huh. Well, the disciple I'd found a while ago is about to finish his training soon, so there should be no problems with finding a successor for *C*. Once you gather up the information please contact me."

Cutting off the correspondence, she looked up at the moon-filled sky.

She looked in the direction of Akamaki City, where the Central Headquarters were located. The Rank 1 Mushitsuki *Fuyuhotaru* that had been captured during

last year's Christmas Eve escaped from there just last week. Perhaps the excellent Mushitsuki called C, whom Inuko put great trust in, had also been involved in that incident.

"*Fuyuhotaru* causes nothing but trouble around her, just like always."

She spontaneously clenched her fists.

The fight revolving around *Fuyuhotaru* that started four years ago continued even now.

The multitudes of powers mingled with one another, involved not only Mushitsuki but also normal people, and even now seemed expanding all the more.

"All sorts of important battles are unfolding in places where I'm not present..."

Originally Inuko should have also been going around battlefields.

She was the "berserker" feared by both enemies and allies, Shishidou Inuko.

She had once even protected the back of the Rank 1 demon, but didn't possess any of the power she had after being exiled from the frontlines anymore. Her abilities were currently on decline, so even if she took part in important battles, it was obvious she would end up standing in the way of something crucial.

"There's nothing as pitiful as a warrior left behind in a battle..."

A lonely smile rose to Inuko's mouth.

"My body can't endure any big battles anymore."

A berserker left behind in battle.

A ruined fighter continuing her lone journey.

Inuko shook her head and recalled her position.

"That's not good, I'm already retired from active duty after all. I need to focus on my current mission."

Since she had already learned all techniques for fighting, there were still things she could do.

She lived to this day by believing so.

"Remember this well, you Original Three who keep giving birth to Mushi. You probably only think of humans as your prey. Yet you can't even begin to imagine our 'possibilities'."

The day will come for the Mushitsuki's greatest battle—the decisive fight against the Original Three.

As well as the clashing between the various powers revolving around *Fuyuhotaru*.

And Inuko herself would be unable to fight in those battlefields.

Before long they will be thrown into the war front: those who had been found and raised by Inuko, the new generation of Mushitsuki so to speak.

"By the time you produce one Mushitsuki I'll raise ten warriors."

Special Environmental Preservation Bureau Central Headquarters member *Asagi*, Shishidou Inuko.

The mission given to her by the organization was to search and capture undiscovered Mushitsuki, as well as to raise combatants.

"Scouting" those with a talent for fighting was Inuko's current duty.

Shishidou Inuko's "battle training".

The target was Shiohara Shachito.

—Start.

2.00 Shachito Part 2

He received 28 emails.

—You're super late, man! We'll make you pay the studio rent!

—Say, are you really not dating anyone, Shachi-kun~?

—Heard there was an accident on the main road! You pass there right? You alive, Shachi?

—What pages was the homework in literature?

—I was invited to a mixer! Are you free this Saturday?

—I got my hands on the DVD of that movie we talked about! Should I lend it to you or what?

It was early morning.

Having woken up inside the bed in his room, Shachito checked his cellphone first of all.

Seeing the contents of the emails sent to him, he felt relieved.

Shachito's daily life was stuffed inside a small LCD screen. The voices of his friends dragged him back to his unchanging daily life.

However—

"..."

Rousing his body, he tried wiping off the cold sweat stuck to his forehead. He felt the rough sensation of bandage. Also feeling some discomfort in his chest, he tried rolling up his shirt. He had large bruises.

He recalled the events of yesterday after school.

While riding his motorbike, he was pursued by an abnormal monster—a Mushitsuki and his Mushi on the main street in the town center. It all turned

out like this due to a simple reason; it was because Shachito had disturbed the Mushitsuki during his enjoyable rampage.

He felt the premonition of death, but when he came to he was looking down at the collapsed Mushitsuki.

At that point, someone suddenly appeared to attack him.

She was a mysterious girl who wore a raincoat despite there being no signs of any rain. Since she had been freely teleporting all around Shachito, it was obvious she was no ordinary person. It was possible she wasn't even human but some kind of phantom.

Anyhow Shachito lost his consciousness, and when he opened his eyes again the raincoat girl was gone. To run away from the other Mushitsuki who was still collapsed there, he rode on his So1o and left.

Coming back home, Shachito lied to his family that he "fell with his motorbike" and immediately went to sleep.

"..."

When he finished replying to all his emails, Shachito readily made a decision.

"Yeah, I'll just forget all about it. Everything last night was just a bad dream."

He nodded to himself with a light smile. The memories of what happened yesterday after school were gone from his mind.

Although this misfortune befell him, Shachito was able to return to his previous life just like that. He had no intention to ever involve himself with dangerous happenings.

He rubbed his forehead over the bandages.

Just like the bruises on his chest, he felt no pain there.

"Wow, you really were in an accident!"

"Ouch... are you okay, Shachi-kun?"

"At least you weren't run over or anything. You just fell down, right?"

—When he went to school, his classmates immediately swarmed around him after seeing the bandages on his head.

"Yeah, I thought I was a goner. It blew me away. Like this, whoosh."

As he spoke with a smile his classmates were relieved. They cracked jokes and tried touching his head.

They kept talking incessantly ever since he entered the classroom. Shachito's motorbike accident—once they finished hearing his made-up story, the topic changed to the large-scale accident that happened on the main road last evening. The incident caused by the full-face helmet Mushitsuki was apparently reported as a large vehicle going on a rampage.

Even though there should have been plenty of eyewitnesses, it became the fault of a reckless driver—Shachito could feel there has been some intentional information manipulation by someone, but this had nothing to do with him. He didn't have the slightest will to know about the sort of person who could control the media.

"Good mornin'!"

He smiled as he called toward the girl entering the class. She was the one who had slapped him yesterday.

She made a surprised face, but soon dropped her gaze and went to her seat. Perhaps worried about what happened the other day, she made no response to Shachito's voice.

You don't have to mind it that much though, Shachito smiled wryly.

"Ah, thinking about it you've been getting along well with her lately, you bastard. Is it going well?"

"I told you already, that's not a thing."

He draped his arm around the neck of the friend making fun of him and strangled him. Even with his friends it was always like this.

The more he fooled around with his friends, the more he could feel the slightly remaining worries from yesterday vanish. As he laughed heartily he could feel alive.

Like I thought "this side" really is the place for me—

Shachito simply lost his mind yesterday. Perhaps his mind had been confused

after being slapped by his classmate. That sensation born from the fight with the Mushitsuki was an incidental by-product of the Shachito of "that side" born amidst extreme tension. He simply became demented.

The Shachito who was carefree, didn't think of anything too deeply and spent his days enjoyably...

That one was his true self.

But suddenly a deep voice was reborn in his mind.

—After all you're a Mushitsuki, right?

Although he almost cleanly forgot all about his anxiety, Shachito's face froze with a shudder.

In contrast to her foolish exterior, the gaze coming from the raincoat girl for an instant was abnormal. It felt like he met someone he shouldn't have—and he had the premonition he would definitely be found out someday. He recalled that indescribable fear.

"...Well, it has nothing to do with me though."

He muttered in the intervals between the conversations with his classmates.

It had nothing to do with Shachito. He was able to keep concealing the fact he was a Mushitsuki and he had the confidence he could live without letting anyone notice it.

He just had bad luck with women or something yesterday.

Thinking this, he then recalled another girl he'd met then.

Right, that girl—

The first-year student that helped him pull out his motorcycle from the parking area... Shachito had gotten into this mess with the Mushitsuki that had nothing to do with him all in order to save the bus the girl had been riding on.

Thinking about it, that underclassman girl could also be said to be a part of his troubles with women.

I wonder if she made it in time for her urgent business or whatever— Yet he didn't have a bad impression of her. He didn't save her because he wanted her

to rely on him; he'd just done it on a whim.

"Hey, do you know any girl in first year who's about this tall and has curly hair... and, how do I put it, she always seems fidgety..."

Breaking from the circle of the conversation, he stealthily asked this of one of his friends. This classmate habitually boasted about his extensive knowledge of all girls in the school; he was the kind of well-informed person one could find anywhere.

"Huh? Any other special features?"

"Umm, she had a checkered scarf. I think she was quite cute."

"A checkered scarf, huh... I can't say for sure, but it might be Masaki Rio."

Shachito had no expectations, so he was surprised at hearing a precise name. *Who the hell are you?* He wanted to ask, but since his friend began explaining he shut up and listened.

"Among those you'd count as 'cute', if there's any girl that fulfills these conditions it's her. Year 1 Class D, Masaki Rio. She doesn't belong to any club. She's apparently part of some theatrical company, but... I don't know much else."

"No, even that's plenty amazing... hmm, so she's Masaki Rio. —Come to think of it, the first-years apparently see me as some sort of playboy, but is that for real?"

"Are you really asking?"

"...No, let's stop here. Thank you."

He expressed his thanks and returned to his seat. As he was told "don't forget to reply about the mixer" in a loud voice, the eyes of everyone in class focused on him. —And so the misunderstanding about him being a playboy will probably keep spreading through the school.

After a while the teacher in charge came and short homeroom started. The teacher left the class at an earlier time than the usual after leaving a few messages.

Shachito absentmindedly looked up at the clock above the blackboard.

There was still plenty of free time until the first period started.

"..."

He rose from his seat and left the class.

Shachito was headed for the first floor, toward the classes of the first-year students. Going down the stairs, he walked toward the direction of Class D.

Seeing a student with a different tie color walking in the corridor, he felt the gazes of the first-years in no small numbers. He started taking it half-seriously and boldly advanced through the corridor.

He arrived at Class D just as short homeroom ended. The teacher coming out of the classroom glanced quizzically at Shachito who was from a different class year and left.

"Hello everyone, good day! I'm a playboy from second year, is there a Masaki Rio here?"

As he called toward a girl who was about to exit the classroom, the entire class's gazes immediately focused on him. Not only that, it became deadly silent in an instant. He only intended it as a joke, but made a strained smile at the unexpected response.

"What do all my cute underclassmen think of me...? Seriously..."

"U-umm, Masaki-san has yet to—oh, there she is."

As he turned around, he could see the figure of a girl heading for class while half running.

There was no mistake; she was the girl who'd helped him yesterday. He was grateful for the accuracy of his classmate's information network.

Out of breath probably because she came there in a hurry, Rio faced her class and saw Shachito. Perhaps unable to understand the situation she stared in amazement and froze in front of him. Looking between his face and classroom D, she thought of something and crossed her arms in an X shape.

"What business do you have with my class, Shiohara-senpai? Hah, are you possibly trying to get one of the girls in your clutches... I will protect the peace of Class D!"

"Thank you. I'll borrow this for a bit."

"Hah, go ahead."

"Eh? A-are you talking about me? Wait, have I been so casually betrayed by my own classmate?"

Grabbing the flustered Rio's arm, he went far from the front of the class.

He pulled her all the way to the faucets. Rio seemed as cautious as ever. If someone else were to see them it would probably look like he was pushing her against the wall.

"Uhhh, umm... d-do you have any business with me?"

Since she was restlessly looking around her, was she waiting for someone to rescue her? Shachito was once again shocked at the lack of her trust in him.

"It's not like I'm going to eat you... Can you calm down for now? I'm just a bit curious about what happened yesterday after school."

"Ah, what's up with those bandages! Are you hurt? —Wait! How did you know which class I was anyway?"

"Please listen to what people tell you."

"Auu! Daa! Oou..."

As Shachito flicked her forehead with his finger without thinking, the moment Rio bent herself back, the back of her head hit the wall. She held both front and rear and her shoulders trembled.

As he thought she was an amusing girl. It was like... just by looking at her he would forget about anything that bothered him—like the incident with the Mushitsuki yesterday for example.

"I just wanted to ask you if you managed to get in time for your business after what happened. I just got curious is all."

"After... what happened?"

After your bus nearly got wrecked by the Mushitsuki—he almost said this reflexively toward the girl that looked up at him with tear-filled eyes, but stopped himself.

"I just thought it would be unforgivable if I caused you to become late after helping me with my motorbike. It was something important right?"

"—Yes, it was important."

A radiant smile rose to Rio's face. Shachito was surprised.

"I did not make it in time, but... since the bus I was riding in was affected by a traffic accident, I was somehow allowed in despite being late. So it's fine."

She spoke clearly with a well-articulated tone. Now that she calmed down, Rio's speaking tone was soft on the ears.

"I see."

He had such a sincere smile it surprised even himself.

"I'm glad."

"Eh... N-no, this wasn't really your fault, senpai, so..."

Saying this, her face flushed and she hung her head.

This time Shachito was the one flustered by having an underclassman girl take him into consideration.

"E-even so I can't feel satisfied. Let me apologize somehow. I know, an acquaintance of mine is having an event, so if you have some free time..."

"I do not."

Right after raising her head again, she cleanly refused. Shachito hung his head dejectedly.

"H-huh? What's wrong?"

"It's not like I have any ulterior motive or anything!"

Suddenly speaking in a loud voice, Shachito grabbed Rio's shoulders. Rather than her just refusing his invitation, he couldn't bear not clearing this strange misunderstanding.

"I've caused many misunderstandings, but I never called out girls at random! I don't know what rumors there are, but they're all untrue! Got it?"

"...Umm..."

As Shachito brought his face closer, Rio awkwardly averted her eyes.

"T-that's not what I meant... I really don't have any time to play around."

"Huh?"

"I have practice in the theater during early morning, ballet and Conversational English lesson after school, and my schedule really is stuffed full with theater practice. I also work part-time all through Saturday..."

"Theater... like drama and stuff?"

"Yes! My dream is to someday stand on the grand stage!"

Rio nodded, her expression sparkling.

Her dream.

Hearing that word, Shachito was taken aback.

Mushi were said to exist by eating people's dreams.

—Yet that rumor was a lie.

Shachito was a Mushitsuki yet he had no dream. He simply spent his days playing around.

And that was why he loved cheering for people that worked hard for their dreams. They possessed what he didn't have.

Shachito smiled and let go of Rio.

"I hope it comes true."

"Thanks!"

A dreamless Mushitsuki and a normal girl with a dream smiled at each other.

"But shouldn't you let out some steam every once in a while? If you manage to have some free time call me. Shall I tell you my email?"

"Y-yes. Wait a minute, umm... Ah! Could this pattern possibly mean I've been deceived? As I thought you're a playboy, Shiohara-senpai—"

"Nonono. It's fine, get out your cellphone already. The lesson's about to start."

Rio brought out her cellphone and they exchanged email addresses.

"...Huu, so easy."

"W-what's up with that laugh! So I *was* deceived!"

As he teased Rio, the bell signaling the start of lessons rang.

"Here it is. Oh no. Today I have to move classes starting right from the first period—"

Turning his body around in order to return to his class, Shachito widened his eyes.

He could see something outside the window on the roof of the parking area in front of the main gate—a yellow figure was standing there. It was a baby-faced girl who wore a raincoat and rain boots despite it not raining. She had riding goggles lowered down to her neck and was busy munching a lollipop... he would never mistake that figure.

"R-return my email address! I have to give a resolute NO to any fraud—H-huh? What's wrong? You seem pale..."

"...! N-no, it's—"

Surprised, he turned back around to Rio.

His heart pounded so strongly it seemed about to burst out of his chest. Although he was supposed to forget all about it by speaking with Rio, the scenes of his fight against the Mushitsuki from yesterday rushed through his mind.

"...!"

The moment he moved his gaze out the window again, he couldn't see any trace of the raincoat on the parking area's roof.

His heartbeats seemed so loud to the point they shook his eardrums. He could feel a chill running down his spine.

"Senpai? ...Ah, that was the bell just now. It seemed somewhat stranger than normal... it was a horrible sound that made my head hurt."

"The bell? I-is that so? It might've been so. —So, I'll be going back to my class.

I'll contact you again."

As he showed Rio a forced smile and left in fast walking, she called "If you send me any strange messages I won't reply!" at his back.

The first-years all entered their own classes in streams.

Suddenly walking in an empty corridor, Shachito was confused.

"It was my imagination... right?"

When he came to, he was walking fast. He headed for the stairs without looking to the sides.

He was being watched—

He wanted to think it was just an illusion, but he felt a gaze that seemed to pierce his entire body. This sense of tension that seemed to rob his breath wasn't an illusion.

At that time, while Shachito was in front of that collapsed Mushitsuki, that raincoat girl attacked him without any warning. After she beat him easily without him even able to understand her actions, he felt like she said something to him.

—You passed.

He recalled it and shuddered.

What on earth had he passed? What was that person who looked like a ghost—no, like a "traveller" trying to do to him?

Maybe this time she'll really kill me—

"...!"

As he reached the stairs, he could see the corridor with the shoe racks. A girl stood there. She equipped her goggles and her fluttering raincoat was surging with purple electricity.

"Yo, haven't seen you since yesterday, Shiohara Shachito-kun."

Not even the question of how she knew his name rose to his mind.

He instinctively rushed toward the corridor of the special classes to the

opposite direction of the raincoat girl. He climbed up the stairs at the end of the corridor, ran through the second-floor corridor, opened a door and leapt inside the cooking preparation room.

"W-what's up with her...!"

He had no idea why he was being chased by such a mysterious opponent. Perhaps he had witnessed some great secret and so some secret organization or whatever sent their assassin after him—only such clichéd guesses rose to his mind.

"I haven't the slightest memory of me doing anything that would warrant me being targeted by something like that...!"

Adjusting his breathing for a while, he carefully peeked from inside the preparation room and probed into the corridor.

The special classroom area was desolate and silence returned to the area.

He was able to stroke his chest in relief only for a moment.

"Don't be so rude. Please call me Shishidou Inuko-sama."

The voice came from above.

Shachito gazed up at the ceiling and was lost for words.

"What you're thinking about now—is perfectly clear for someone as wise as me."

The raincoat-wearing girl was hanging down from the ceiling.

No, the expression "hanging down" was incorrect. She was more precisely using both her legs to "stand" on the ceiling while upside-down.

"You're surely wondering how is it that my skirt isn't falling down even though I'm upside-down, right? You're such a perv. Fufu, I have a trick for that, my skirt is actually—"

He wasn't thinking anything about that.

And even if he did it didn't matter.

She had worn some torn jeans under her skirt yesterday. Yet his eyes were attracted to the raincoat so he shouldn't have had the chance to notice that.

"U-uwah!"

Seeing an impossible scene in front of him, Shachito leapt out to the corridor. Not even breathing properly, he rushed down the staircase.

Coming down to the first floor, he aimed for the passageway ahead of the corridor. It was the same passageway connected to the gymnasium where he'd been slapped by his classmate.

Yet as he stepped into it, a raincoat rolling around in the courtyard was lying in wait.

Noticing Shachito, Shishidou Inuko abruptly roused her body and blushed.

"H-hey! I wanted to surprise you by rolling in iron sand and shouting 'I'm the Monster Kabigon!'... Don't come here while I'm still preparing the joke."

"...!"

"Ah, wait! I still have other gags—"

It was just like a nightmare.

Shachito ran outdoors and jumped to the emergency staircase connected to the school building. *Clang clang*, he caused this sound while rushing upstairs.

The area above the fourth floor was partitioned by locked fences. Yet Shachito lightly kicked the wall and by making a high jump passed over them.

A cold wind blew.

"Do use your power."

Having reached the rooftop, the calmly standing figure of a girl was reflected in his eyes.

In a complete change from her inappropriate easygoing expression just now, the raincoat-clad Inuko's eyes became sharp.



"Let me tell you something. No matter what you do, you'll never be able to escape me."

The immense killing intent emitted by Inuko became the trigger.

"Uhhh—"

Being cornered, Shachito raised his arms as if controlled by someone. His index finger and middle finger cut through air, pointing at Inuko.

A red glow was emitted from Shachito's body. Assuming the form of an Autumn Darter in midair, the glow morphed into a flash of light and stabbed into Inuko without giving her any time to evade.

Shachito could feel his body growing lighter. At the same time Inuko's weight was increased, and along with a heavy vibration cracks ran through the floorboards.

Using his ability, Shachito transferred his body weight to the girl and further amplified it. With that, her mass should be equal to that of a car. It was a mass that no human muscles could ever move.

Now that he'd sealed Inuko's movements and even turned his own weight to zero, if he were to jump down the roof— As he tried turning his body, purple lightning cut into Shachito's field of vision.

"—Don't think about getting away."

In the blink of an eye, the edge of the hockey stick pressed under his jaw.

"Giving up and running away will only lead to a loss."

In a split instant, Inuko who was shrouded in purple electricity dove under Shachito. She lightly wielded the stick that should have been made dozens of times heavier by his ability.

I'm gonna be killed—

Feeling death looming, he tightly shut his eyes.

Yet no matter how much he waited for the blow he was resolved against, it never came.

"...?"

Opening his eyes gingerly, he saw Inuko stopped her movements with her stick still poking his neck. Looking up coldly at the frightened Shachito, a sneer rose to her face.

"You're so stupid. Why did you run away? Why didn't you try fighting?"

Having a scornful smile directed at him, Shachito immediately felt blood rushing up to his head.

It's because you attacked me for no reason!

He tried opening his mouth to say this, yet Inuko interrupted his words.

"Obviously you were in panic. And you have had no idea why you were being attacked. So you don't have a reason to fight. —That's the stupid thing you wanted to say, right?"

"...!"

"But it's the opposite, the opposite. You have no reason *not* to fight."

Lowering her stick, Inuko lightly pushed Shachito's chest. Now standing upright, he was blown away toward the fences just by this blow.

As he fell on his butt, the hockey stick was pointed at his nose.

"You're a Mushitsuki and you were attacked by someone. Where in that situation do you see a reason to not fight? If you don't want to die then fight. If you want to survive then fight before collapsing. If you don't want to become a mindless Fallen then think. If you forget to struggle in order to stay alive then you have already lost."

Shachito gazed up at the girl dumbfounded. He still hadn't absolved his ability.

"Is me being able to move freely so strange? —There are metal fibers inserted into my clothes. This stick is also made of steel. I also told you already while I was chasing you. The story about my skirt, the term 'iron sand'... Since you've missed all of these hints you ended up with your life within my grasp."

Magnetism—

Shachito realized what Inuko's ability was.

If the girl in front of his eyes was a Mushitsuki just like him and could control

magnetism then it explained everything. Since the school building had an iron framework then it was fully possible to use attraction and repulsion to stand on the ceiling or move at high speeds. If the magnetism she controlled was that powerful then she could do it even though her mass was amplified by Shachito's ability.

"When I'm at a city surrounded by metal I'm invincible. Remember that."

As Inuko puffed out her moderate chest, he could no longer feel any murderous intent from her.

"...So."

"Hmm?"

"What's going to happen with me? Telling me to 'remember that' means I'm not getting killed?"

The orange Autumn Darter flew out of Inuko and returned to Shachito.

Realizing he was no match for her no matter how hard he tried, he lost all will to either escape or fight. As he felt resigned, the confusion brought by fear was also gone. Even he realized she could kill him any time she wanted to.

What Shachito realized was that the monster known as Shishidou Inuko set her eyes on him. And all because of the one time he used the ability he had been hiding for years and years.

"Hmm... seems like you were able to understand your position. Truly admirable."

Grinning pleasantly, Inuko used her stick to pat Shachito's head. He felt the urge to kill.

"—In this country there's an organization known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau."

Inuko started speaking while the cold February wind caused her raincoat to flutter.

This Special Environmental Preservation Bureau appeared to be the name of the government agency made to supervise Mushitsuki. There were many Mushitsuki other than Shachito in the country, and that organization made

them work in order to search, manage, isolate and at times train Mushitsuki.

"...Hmm, I get it."

Shachito smiled wryly.

As he lived a normal life, this was obviously something hard to believe. Yet some parts of it he could comprehend. He himself was a Mushitsuki, so he could definitely imagine there being people who thought that letting people like him run wild was dangerous.

"So does that mean I'll be taken to that SEPB place and quarantined?"

He squinted while looking up at the blue sky.

So he wouldn't be able to return to his present lifestyle—

Now that he thought this, he yearned for his enjoyable days.

Even for the cellphone and its unending stream of emails.

Even to his beloved ride the So1o rushing through the roads.

Even for the fresh air he took into his lungs.

Perhaps he wouldn't even be able to experience freedom ever again.

"...So that email address she told me was for nothing."

He wanted to speak more with the underclassman girl known as Masaki Rio.

He thought of such things.

"I'll give you a chance."

With the sun at her back, Shishidou Inuko said something unexpected.

"There's something I have to do in this city. Until I accomplish that I'll keep silent about you from the SEPB. And during that time—"

Shachito widened his eyes. He thought he would surely be thrown into some isolation facility with no ifs or buts.

"I will discipline you."

The girl who boasted of herself as invincible declared in a loud voice.

"You have a talent for fighting. I will make you into a first-rate warrior by my

hands."

"...Hah? A warrior?"

For an instant he couldn't understand what Inuko was saying.

Until yesterday he was just a normal high school student but now he was going to become a warrior? How on earth had she arrived at this idea? Was the girl in front of him even sane?

"If you don't like it then run away. As long as I'm in this city I will definitely find you. Just like you saw during our little game of tag earlier, I will never let you escape. If you want to run away from me you'll have to become stronger than me."

Whoosh, along with the sound of cutting air the stick was pointed at Shachito.

"If you become stronger than me before I depart for my journey then I'll give you your freedom again. Do your best."

The confused Shachito and the Inuko who was smiling enjoyably.

The two Mushitsuki facing each other under the clear sky.

This could be said to be the moment when Shiohara Shachito and Shishidou Inuko—the old and the new berserker changed places.

Shiohara Shachito's "basic training".

—Start.

2.01 The Others

Masaki Rio's time after school was short.

It became natural for her to be the first one to exit the class once the bell for the final lesson rang.

Her after-school time was stuffed full of things like practice at her theatrical company or lessons. She even had almost no memories of hanging out with her classmates.

"Ouch, this—"

The joints in her limbs ached just by her trying to get her shoes out of the shoe rack.

Her body became exhausted by these days of having practice and lesson without any pause. She recently even had to do her best fighting against drowsiness during class.

"—Doesn't hurt one bit!"

She told herself, tightening her lips.

Turning around in the corridor, she could see her smiling classmates walking without a care. Perhaps they were going to hang around the city or on their way to their clubs. Either way, they seemed to be having fun every day celebrating their youth.

She didn't feel jealous though.

Rio had a dream.

When she was little, she had seen the musical known as "Beast" during an overseas trip. Finding herself captivated by its magnificence and overwhelming scale, she also started wishing to perform on the same stage.

"Today I'll also do my best at practice! Oooh!"

Imitating the English tragedy "Emperor", she heroically brandished her fist. Rio's voice, well-trained in pronunciation, echoed well in the empty entrance.

Closing the cover of the shoe rack, she went outside as if jumping.

Today she was also pressed for time by her theater practice. While hurrying to the school gate, her eyes unconsciously went toward the parking area.

"Muuu, are you skipping school again, Shiohara senpai?"

She muttered, puffing her cheeks.

Every time she exited school, Rio would end up looking around for a blue vehicle.

It started ever since the day her teacher had summoned her to talk about her plans for the future and came late to her important audition. Ever since she had helped the boy who was unable to pull out his motorbike from the parking area.

"So you're skipping school today?"

It has been several days ever since she met Shiohara Shachito, who was one year her senior. On the following day he pestered her to exchange their email addresses.

However, she hadn't seen him at school since then. And even though they exchanged addresses she hadn't received any message from him even once.

If that wasn't enough, Rio hadn't seen his So1o after finishing school. Had he left early or simply hadn't come to school at all?

Was Shachito playing around somewhere today as well?

"You're not even sending me any messages... You're a playboy just like I thought."

The rumors about the second-year student known as Shiohara Shachito were neither compliments nor anything good. She was even warned to "be careful!" by one of her classmates with a stern look.

Yet for Rio, who spent her days practicing and working part-time, just having someone of the opposite sex call out to her was a major event. Ignoring it would be impossible.

Also, there was Shachito's expression as he told her that "me being a playboy is a misunderstanding"... Although they were only a year apart, he seemed so very mature— "—NO! NO! You can't think of anything unnecessary right now, Rio!"

Holding her head while running, she gazed up the heavens just like the worrying heroine of the French play "The Queen's Tomb".

It would be no exaggeration to say that this was the greatest turning point of Rio's life.

She exited the main gate heading for the bus stop just as the bus arrived. Running through the sidewalk as fast as she could, she was barely able to board it.

"Hah, this was too much for my heart..."

Grabbing onto a strap, she held down her throbbing chest.

As she watched Holland City's townscape flowing outside the window, Rio's expression became serious.

Her heart throbbing violently was neither because of thinking about Shachito nor because she ran there in a hurry.

"..."

As Rio bit her lips, the strap she was grasping made a squeezing sound.

Next month, a musical would be held in Holland City's tourist site known as Oranje Land.

And its name was—"Beast".

This musical, none other than the one that started Rio's dream, was to be reproduced by a large theatrical company in Japan. Furthermore, due to the unplanned vacancy of the actor that should have played a major role, sudden auditions were being held. Those who passed would also be able to participate in public performances in various places.

Originally the company managing it was supposed to supply the replacements. However, due to the strong request of the public performance advisor visiting Japan, Jarre Harissi, the auditions became open to the general

public in trial form.

Making a name for himself by the famous play "Beast", Jarre Harissi was part of its cast in the first showing in Broadway. And the young Rio had been overwhelmed by his performance there.

This was truly a heavensent chance for her.

If she were to catch Jarre's attention, she would be able to receive genuine Broadway training. She had also heard of many people who received roles overseas thanks to his recommendations.

She might be able to stand on the stage that started her dream— It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Rio worked hard only for this day to come.

"...Oh no, I can't stop shaking."

Thinking of unnecessary things was far easier. Her hand stroking her chest trembled.

—Today the results of the second judging phase of the audition she had taken the other day would be revealed.

"Uhh..."

Being shaken by the bus, her face grimaced with tension. She could somehow feel her mood growing worse.

If she were to pass, Rio's efforts thus far would be rewarded.

But if she failed—

She cast her gaze down and bit her lower lip.

Rio was butting against a wall right now.

During her theater practice she was scolded by the director and during her ballet lesson she was surpassed by the other students. It could be because she was tired, but what if it wasn't so—what if Rio's talent simply reached its limits...

"...NO! NO! You can't be so weak! You've done everything you can, yeah!"

She spoke to herself in a low voice.

As she did this, she could suddenly hear a strange voice in her ears.

"...!"

Her shoulders shook up with a start and she held her head.

She looked around her, but the other passengers feigned ignorance. They didn't seem to hear it.

This again—

Recently a certain sound followed Rio.

It was a cracked sound that sounded like metal being struck. An uncomfortable, foul sound that seemed to pierce her from head to toes. And although it sounded as loud as possible, only Rio could hear it.

Her head hurt. She was perhaps even more tired than she thought.

"—Have you heard what happened to their daughter?"

She heard the conversation of two ladies who seemed to be housewives sitting near her.

"She's going to Horanto High School, right? In second year, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yeah, they said she was set to perform at the national competition of brass bands... wasn't there also talk about creating a support group in the parent's association?"

The voice of the two thinly-smiling middle-aged women sounded awfully sinister.

"Oh, seems like that's no longer a thing. I heard she herself quit the performance."

"Oh my, what happened to her?"

"Something about receiving a shock from a broken heart and being unable to recover. Even though she had so much talent that seemed to be her limit."

"The guy must've been horrible, right? But..."

"Yeah, and she worked so hard for it too... *but it was all for nothing.*"

Rio widened her eyes.

It was all for nothing—

Hearing these words, she was unable to contain herself. Her pulse quickened and her presence of mind was taken away.

E-everything that I've done so far, might become meaningless— Becoming scared of continuing to the gymnasium like this, she pressed the stop button. The bus soon stopped and she ran out of it as if escaping some gaze. She could see that something resembling a black fog also separated from the bus. It was probably some exhaust gas.

Rio got off at about two bus stops away from her destination. It was near the crossing where the accident happened a few days ago. She could see laborers blocking the roadway due to repair work.

She could reach the gymnasium on foot even from there. In order to calm herself down, Rio entered a convenience store along the road.

"...NO, NO. I have to fix my habit of getting scared and running away."

Standing still in the magazine corner, she mumbled to herself.

Although she was like this, Rio embodied the hopes and dreams of the theatrical group she belonged to. However, she had the bad habit of folding down to pressure and becoming unable to do her best.

"I want to go have fun somewhere..."

Standing still in the magazine corner, she muttered to herself.

It has been a while since she thought of something like that.

Her days of chasing after her dreams by themselves were fun. But when the time came for her dream to be tested she immediately became helpless.

Until now she was never able to make a satisfactory performance. Because of that she lacked any confidence in herself and couldn't imagine herself succeeding.

She felt as if her dream would never come true—

And this premonition recently made Rio increasingly unable to focus on her

practice.

"Not to mention I haven't been seeing that person who said he would take to have some fun..."

Puffing her cheeks, Rio recalled Shiohara Shachito. She felt like she would accept an invitation to hang out if it came from him right now.

She was running away from her dream.

It was an extremely sweet temptation.

"Buha! Sorry, this is... I don't really need a bag...!"

Rio came to her senses with a start due to the loud voice that echoed inside the store.

"Shiohara-senpai?"

Seeing the boy standing in front of the cash register, she widened her eyes.

Holding a plastic bottle in hand, Shiohara Shachito turned to look at her. He was wearing his school-issued jersey and was sweating like a waterfall.

"...Aahh!"

A smile that could be said to be amiable at best and flippant at worst rose to Shiohara Shachito's face. Seeing his fragile and androgynous facial features, she thought that he must be quite liked by girls.

"Rio-chan! What an incredible coincidence!"

Having her name called in a loud voice made her blush. Although they've only exchanged a few words, he drew closer as if they were friends for many years. Excluding her dad, it was her first time for a boy to call her name.

"D-don't say my name so loudly! Also don't call my name! P-politeness is not just for strangers!"

Being cautious, or perhaps embarrassed, she backed away.

"Why? Isn't it fine? You can also call me by my name. If you won't then I'll poke your forehead again."

Yet Shachito didn't mind it and rudely approached Rio.

"S-Shiohara-senpai..."

"Yes, that will do. Sorry for being unable to mail you. Actually I'm in a situation where I can't reply much even if it wasn't you. ...Aah, just like I expected you make me feel healed. It works especially well when I'm tired."

S-so casual—

With a grimace still on her face, she was completely cornered by him.

She didn't know why, but Shachito behaved extremely relieved. He was in high spirits as if he hadn't spoken to any person for several years.

She felt as if he might end up hugging her if she shut up. She recalled the words that offense was the best defense.

"W-why are you here after ditching school? That's why people call you a playboy!"

"Hmm? Why do you know I haven't been going to school, Rio-chan?"

She received a counter punch. She couldn't be upfront about the fact she had been looking out for his motorbike every day. She became speechless and sank into silence.

While Shachito was puzzled, he drank some mineral water. After he finished drinking more than half the bottle at once, he took a deep sigh.

"No, how do I explain it... what *am* I doing? I'm been running every day all the way from Oranje Land to the city and back, but what will become of that? She's called it basic stamina training, but I don't get it at all."

"Huh? From Oranje Land to here... it should be a few kilometers..."

"Well, it's not like I'm giving it everything I have, I just do whatever."

Seeing Shachito say this while smiling, Rio erased her expression.

"What about you, Rio-chan? Have you been working hard for your dream?"

The anxiousness supposedly gone by her talking with Shachito now reared its head again.

If she hadn't gone out of the bus midway through, she would've probably known the audition results by now.

Yet she feared these results and so was here.

"I-I'm..."

Seeing Rio hesitant to speak, Shachito made a puzzled face. Yet he soon grinned.

"I didn't even have to ask. Seems like you are working hard."

"Huh?"

"Look, the fact you're so worried proves it, right? Because no matter the person, when they do their best for something they would definitely be anxious."

While he said this, Shachito himself didn't seem to be even slightly anxious.

Unconsciously making a dumbfounded face, she ended up staring at the boy in front of her.

"Umm... don't you have any kind of worries, Shachito-senpai?"

As she asked him, he shook his head while grinning.

"Oh, none at all. Every day's fun."

"So casual..."

"That's why I'm jealous of you."

Having this carefree smile directed at her, Rio felt her heart throb.

"Having a clear goal, working hard for it, and worrying about it... all of them are things I can't understand. I have no dream or anything else."

Originally she would have been angry at him at about this point. *You don't understand how I feel*—was the only thing for her to say, but she didn't think she would be able to affirm it clearly while facing him.

The reason Rio didn't feel anger was probably due to Shachito's expression. She realized from his full smile that he truly envied her from the bottom of his heart.

"So I want to root for you, Rio-chan."

"Eh..."

Shachito spoke as Rio's cheeks flushed.

"If you're fine with me, I'll give you advice whenever you want. You also need to take a breather sometimes, so if you're feeling bad give me a call. And even if you won't call me, I'll call you."

"Ah..."

Still holding her bag, Rio lowered her gaze. She didn't want her blushing face to be seen.

He said he would root for her.

These words were very embarrassing, but they caused a feeling she had never felt before.

A small courage that made her want to go to practice immediately welled up in her chest.

Thank you so much—

As Rio was about to say this, she could see a Vespa parking near the convenience store.

"Geh."

Shachito also saw the girl coming off the Vespa.

Although the sky was clear, she had the weird outfit of a raincoat and boots. Her helmet was down on her back and she lowered her goggles to her neck.

Rio found that special appearance familiar.

She recalled that she had bumped into her during the day of the second phase of the audition because she was running in a hurry.

As soon as the raincoat-clad girl entered the shop, she pointed her hockey stick to Shachito's neck. Her mouth that had a stick sticking out of it made a ruthless smile.

"Until now I've raised many disciples... but you're the first one unable to give up your habit of slacking off. Since you immediately disappeared after I took my eyes off of you I couldn't concentrate on my other job. Today's smacking will be different from usual, so do be ready for it."

Rio didn't know why, but Inuko seemed unable to suppress her anger. Since she was emitting a ghastly aura from her entire body, her cute face was ruined.

"It's a misunderstanding, Inuko. Calm down and listen, okay?"

Raising both hands while still holding the plastic bottle, Shachito wore a smile in an attempt to gloss everything over.

"I just met up an acquaintance by chance... It would be weird if I didn't say hello, right? Y'know, it's that whole politeness isn't just for strangers thingy..."

"When will you realize your own position? This isn't the kind of sweet world where you can get by while acting so half-hearted. I can't feel any motivation from you in the first place. The kind of person to run away from just this much training—"

"Geez, we've had the same talk 300 times already."

As Inuko started her preaching in front of an audience, Shachito smiled and let everything enter in one ear and out of the other.

"I'll talk about it as much as I have to. In the first place it's obvious you're treating it with the sort of half-hearted attitude like 'if I'll just go with the flow it'll somehow turn out alright'. You never tackled any problem seriously, nor do you have the intention to really run away—hey, stop with that stupid smile."

Looking at the girl who started tediously preaching to Shachito, an unknown emotion welled inside Rio once again.

Seeing them refer to each other by only their given names, that girl was probably someone closer to Shachito than her.

As Rio grew silent, Shachito looked at her as if recalling her existence.

"Sorry, Rio-chan. I'll be going now."

Stopping the hockey stick from hitting him, he showed his usual light smile.

"I don't know when I'll be able to take you to hang out. Even so, if there's something that troubles you contact me."

"So you're going to use that as an excuse to loaf around again, huh. Do reflect on your actions!" Inuko said as she wielded the stick.

He was worrying about her—Rio didn't even have the mental leeway to think about this now.

She felt ashamed at herself thinking she was someone special to him just because he said that he would root for her.

"Rio-chan?"

Seeing Rio keep silent, Shachito tilted his head.

"..."

Inuko again stared intently at Rio. —In a complete change from how she was with Shachito, her eyes were cool and sharp. Rio felt creeped out as if a bird of prey was watching her.

Unable to endure their two gazes, she ran out of the store without saying anything.

She ended up running away again.

Thinking this, she turned her neck around.

"This isn't the time to think of anything unnecessary. I need to get a hold of myself...!"

She hadn't run away; she just couldn't think of anything other than theater right now. —She desperately told herself that.

When she arrived to her practice, she was so out of breath she felt as if her lungs were pierced by knives. She couldn't even walk well, so she set foot in the entrance with a staggering gait.

As she entered the locker room, there were other theater members of various ages there. So that they wouldn't see her face, Rio hurriedly greeted them and stood in front of her locker.

"Masaki-san."

Her heart throbbed with a start.

She knew it was her senior from her voice. She was the leader of the girl actresses there.

"Y-yes."

Using her bangs to hide her swollen eyes, she turned only half her body around while gazing downwards.

"Congrats."

She was handed a single envelope.

She opened the seal. Inside were the results of the audition the other day.

She passed.

"..."

She could feel as if the throbbing in her chest somewhat settled down.

Turning herself toward the locker, she squeezed the letter.

Everything was fine, her dream was not yet over—

"...Sorry, senpai..."

Was it her happiness at having passed the audition?

Her regret at having ignored Shachito?

Even she couldn't tell what sort of emotion brought forth the lone tear dropping to her feet.

2.02 The Others

The dirty piece of cloth dancing in the upper air of Holland City slowly descended.

Shaking left and right while still fanned by the wind through the orange-dyed sky, it lightly fell toward the surface.

The piece of cloth fell in Holland City's town center.

The stained, black cloth descended atop the head of a man standing on the walkway.

"..."

The man bended his mouth so wide it seemed as if it was ripped apart all the way to his ears. His jaw creaked with painful-seeming sounds as he wore a warped smile.

The stained cloth squirmed like a living being and clung to the man. Covering his entire body, his head was completely concealed by a black hood.

"So the pair of 'vessels' who pursue the 'king' do oppose my whispers. One is soon to be gone, and the other is pursued by a child of Dio... how futile."

The man looked up toward the sky of Holland City. With his scrawny cheeks illuminated by the neon lights, one part of his dried skin peeled off.

A white lump crawled up inside the hem of the hood. Falling on the ground was a small caterpillar. It wasn't only one, as further caterpillars gushed out one after another from inside the hood and fell to the ground.

The man made a large amount of caterpillars crawl at his feet, yet none of the passersby nearby were able to notice it. Men and women of all ages passed near the man as if their eyes didn't even reflect him.

"However, they have yet to notice our other fragments..."

The man dragged his feet on the ground and began walking. The caterpillars gathered on his legs followed the man and moved along.

"This provisional vessel shall not hold long as well... And yet, would it not be amusing to frolic around till I get mine hands on a new one?"

Although there was no wind, the cloth wrapped around the man continually rippled. The man's left eye peeking from inside the hood—the pupil-less, white eyeball, looked at a certain corner.

The man's face wore a smile.

Those who would become his new vessels were already under the influence of the black stains.

There were two vessel candidates.

One had the sort of despair that festered for long days and months, while the other had a fresh, rich despair. The man had come there after sniffing out their despair. He would never run away.

Which of them he would end up inhabiting depended on the vessels.

The two people who could become his vessels would soon yield in to his foul whispers. When that happened the man would be able to obtain his true vessel and regain his original powers.

But perhaps it would be well to weaken his "enemy" before throwing away his current form of the temporary vessel.

"I can feel it... The place where those who still fetter me are hidden..."

The man kept muttering to himself the soliloquy that only he was able to understand.

2.03 Inuko Part 2

As soon as the girl known as Rio had left, Inuko grabbed Shachito's ear and dragged him out of the store.

"Come on, go back to your training already. You still have one more round trip to go."

"I get it, don't pull me!"

When they arrived near the parked Vespa, Shachito resisted violently.

"It doesn't hurt anyway, right? It doesn't matter where I pull you."

"It does matter! You'll tear it off!"

Shaking off Inuko's arm, Shachito glared at her with an unsatisfied face. Since he was one head taller than her, just matching their gazes was a pain.

"By the way, Shachito. —What is that girl to you?"

"What do you mean by what? She's an underclassman from school. I met her just a while ago, but she's a good kid. Being with her is fun... or rather teasing her is amusing. She said her dream was to become an actress."

Apparently getting back into a good mood, Shachito spoke while grinning.

"..."

Inuko looked to the direction that girl had run off to, thinking.

Judging by his behavior, at the very least it didn't seem like they were romantically involved. Yet judging from Rio's flustered behavior, there was no doubt that she was conscious of him.

What a nuisance. Depending on the situation, I might need to act without his knowledge and take care of her—

Looking at Inuko silently squinting, Shachito tilted his head.

"Inuko?"

"—Just now you've said that you have no dream. Even though you're a Mushitsuki."

Turning again to look at Shachito, she asked about something completely different. He nodded with a "yeah".

"That's right. Whenever I try to recall it I feel like my mind is going to fly off somewhere. My mind becomes blank and I can't think of anything."

"You don't have to recall it."

"...?"

"This is something that happens a lot with us Special Type Mushitsuki. Our dream gets distorted and we forget about it. It doesn't hinder us from fighting as combatants."

These words were not a lie.

Yet according to Inuko's conjecture, his "nearly broken" condition was due to another cause.

For long years, Shachito had continuously suppressed his abilities as a Mushitsuki. Yet even during that time his Mushi kept feeding off its host's dream little by little. The host's spirit locked up inside his mind was gnawed into, which caused him to stray away from the healthy mental condition as a human being.

If he were to recall his dream, his broken spirits would be exposed.

If his "nearly broken" condition crumbled, Shachito would obtain a major defect as a fighter.

"Don't worry. If you listen to me you'll definitely be able to become a strong warrior."

Inuko hit his shoulders as if encouraging him, but Shachito made another unsatisfied face.

"Look here... about being a combatant or warrior or whatever? I really don't think I'm well fit for that sorta thing. I was until recently just a normal high

school student after all."

"If you can't do it, I'll simply send you to an isolation facility as a rejected applicant. If that happens you won't be able to stay a normal high school student right? You will also be unable to go and hang out with that girl from earlier."

As Inuko spoke in a causal manner while smiling, Shachito looked at the main street dyed by the setting sun's light.

"Well, that would be troubling."

Scratching his cheek with a finger, he spoke in a completely casual tone. There was no sense of tension.

Yet Inuko felt a certain sense of danger from his response.

Masaki Rio... like I thought she might become an obstacle—

Hiding the murmuring in her heart with a smile, Inuko wielded her hockey stick.

"If so then go already. Don't forget the way of running I've taught you."

"I'm so hungry I might die though. Can't I eat something on the way?"

"You moron. Lick this and try to endure."

"Huh, what the hell's that? It's obviously suspect."

What Inuko threw at him was a lollipop. It was the same kind she was always sucking on. Although he received it with an unsatisfied face, Shachito started running.

In contrast, Inuko had a satisfied face while seeing him off.

The motives of her newfound student Shiohara Shachito regarding the training were quite vague. Probably due to this, he had the habit to slack off the moment she took her eyes off of him. He also lacked self-awareness as a warrior.

Not to mention his physical abilities, but she had nothing to criticize about his flexibility in thinking about the usage of his Mushitsuki abilities, his ability to instantly judge the situation, as well as of his ability itself.

Actually, the training he was going through right now was three times the amount that Inuko had thought up originally. However, even while complaining all the time Shachito completed all of it easily. It was as if he was making up for all the time he concealed being a Mushitsuki.

She had trained countless Mushitsuki until now, but Shachito's natural disposition was outstanding.

She felt as if she was looking at her past self.

There was value for Inuko to pound all of her fighting techniques into him. She intended on raising him into a first-rate warrior no matter what she had to do.

Inuko felt as if she finally found what she was always looking for.

"He'll be able to become my successor easily."

Inuko could only stay in Holland City for a short while. So she definitely had to polish off Shachito into the greatest masterpiece.

She equipped her goggles and wore her helmet. She got on the Vespa and turned the throttle.

Aiming for a certain place, she rode through the town center where the curtain of night fell.

Was it because the sea was nearby? Even the roads in the town center smelled like seawater.

"...What a nice place. Although it's a big city, there's no feeling of being trapped."

Riding through the lines of cars, Inuko started smiling spontaneously.

It wasn't that she hated the countryside, but cities agreed with her more. When she was surrounded by many people, their many waves mixing together felt good to her.

Thinking of it, she started considering the city's atmosphere and the wind as pleasant because she was on a journey wandering through various places.

Inuko went around the country with the mission to find out many Mushitsuki

all on her own. Due to that she didn't stay in the same place for too long, but she unexpectedly became attached to the atmosphere and people of each place.

This wasn't something she thought about during the time she had belonged to a battle unit and spent all of her time on her duties.

At the time she was merely drunk on her own power. The only things she laid her eyes on were enemies, and the only things that made her rejoice were the blood and shrieks of those enemies when they were destroyed.

—Yet the price she had to pay for rushing continuously all the way to one step behind the title of the strongest was large.

"I have the feeling my hometown was also similar to this city."

Inuko didn't remember her own birthplace.

As Mushitsuki continued using their abilities, their dreams— and consequently their spirits—were being eaten by their Mushi. Ever since becoming gravely injured during a certain mission, Inuko lost her resistance toward her own Mushi. Even at times like these her mind and body were being exhausted slowly yet surely.

Now she couldn't even clearly recall the faces of her family.

She could only remember the time she had become a Mushitsuki. As she was young at the time she should have had countless fun memories. Even so, she was only unable to forget the worst moment of her life as if it was burned into her retinas.

"No, I also have the feeling I'm completely wrong... Oh well, it doesn't matter."

Muttering to herself with a tinge of cynicism, she stopped the Vespa.

She came to a large building on a certain corner of the town center. With a thick wall creating some distance from the other buildings around it, she could see a guard office inside the premises behind the metal-made front gate.

Inuko got off the Vespa and lowered her goggles to her neck. As she did the gate opened, and a suit-wearing middle-aged woman approached her.

"Nice to meet you, *Asagi*. So you really are dressed that way. I immediately recognized you."

"Greeting, Branch Director Assistant. It is an honor for you to personally come and welcome me."

In contrast to Inuko's smile, the middle-aged woman made a complex expression. She was probably bothered by the word usage of a girl who was less than half her age. Apparently giving up what she wanted to say, she nodded with a "yeah".

That building served the local branch of the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau that had the area of Holland City under its jurisdiction. Publically it was apparently a governmental investigation agency of some sort.

The one to greet Inuko was the woman who worked as the assistant of the Branch Director. She heard that right after her contact with the branch's intelligence division, that woman volunteered to guide her around the facility.

Shinpu had given birth to multiple Mushitsuki in this city in a short span of time—hearing this fact from Inuko, the local branch hurriedly entered a state of alert.

Consequently Inuko was summoned as a person of interest as she was an eyewitness and had abundant battle experience.

The two entered the gate, heading toward the building. She realized there were surveillance cameras and infrared ray sensors concealed here and there on the premises. More than preparation against an outside enemy, this was a precaution against the escape of the Mushitsuki members who resided underground where there supposedly were housing and training facilities.

"Although late, allow me to thank you for preparing a place of residence for me. However, the shower in the hotel is poor. I wonder if there wasn't any better place."

"Since each branch needs to support a member of the Central Headquarters' Special Squad, there is no need to thank us, *Asagi*. If you have complaints about what you have been offered, should we exchange your room with a first-rate tent or sleeping bag?"

"During the current season I would like not to sleep outside if possible... But it's a great difference from the reception at the East Central Branch I dropped by recently. There was my great student *Himiko* there, and most importantly, the new Acting-Branch Director is a reasonable person. It is a pity I wasn't able to say goodbye due to the turmoil caused by *Fuyuhotaru*'s escape."

"Yes, that Goroumaru Touko... Based only on hearsay, she is apparently so incompetent—I mean quite inexperienced that one can't think of her as Haji Keigo's deputy."

She could sense some thorns in the woman's words. It was possibly dissatisfaction toward Inuko's grand way of speaking and perhaps envy toward the young newbie elected for such an important office.

"Since the Branch Director is waiting, let us hurry. Also..."

While walking toward the entrance to the building shoulder to shoulder, the woman frowned.

"We have received the item you had told us about from the West Central Branch's development team, but is that really it? It looks like mere candy."

"Oh, great. I only had a few more left."

With a smile, Inuko shook the stick inside her mouth. The candy she was eating was of a special kind, and the West Central Branch was in charge of its development. It was a special candy manufactured just for Inuko's use.

"Without this I won't be able to live long."

"...? At any rate, it is safeguarded by the Branch Director so please pick it up later."

As they entered the building, there was a reception desk at the front. There were also gun-wielding guardsmen standing watch in the spacious first floor.

At a glance it seemed like a normal building, but it was obvious this wasn't so. On top of there being a thick partition wall in the passage leading inside, there was also an abnormal number of highly-sensitive cameras concealed in places people wouldn't notice.

According to what Inuko heard, there were training and housing facilities

underground while the intelligence division and the few guard station operated by civilians were located above ground. Not only was each floor separated by countless partition walls, but the Mushitsuki members would enter and exit through different areas as well.

From the outside it was an impregnable stronghold and from the inside it was a secure prison—

It was incomparable to the Central Headquarters' underground fort or the East Central Branch's 'GARDEN', but each branch had their own ways of dealing with the Mushitsuki members.

"Let us go."

Led by the Branch Director Assistant, they passed through the reception desk and headed to the elevator. While Inuko sent gazes around, she noticed countless small holes in the ceiling. Would they fire tear gas in the case of an emergency? It couldn't possibly be poison gas.

"There is something I would like to confirm before speaking with the Branch Director... is that fine, *Asagi*?"

"Hmm? That's fine, ask me anything you want."

While waiting for the elevator, the woman spoke as she looked up at the light indicating the floor number.

"Is *Shinpu* really in this city?"

"...What do you mean?"

"From what I heard, you... when you arrive at a branch you go to oversee the combatant members' training and receive a reward for it, right? Furthermore there were times where, due to your intense training, some members were driven to a point beyond any recovery."

"Since the Central Headquarters is so stingy about money, I end up wasting all of the funding for my journey rather quickly. So there were times I worked part-time as a teacher in some branches. It's also true there were people who were unable to endure my training. Should I train the members here too?"

"—Even if you sponge off of our branch, nothing will come out of it."

The Branch Director Assistant glared at her with cold eyes.

Still smiling, Inuko squinted.

"*Shinpu* has appeared. Instead of helping with the search hand over the money'. —Did you really think I would make such a fake announcement for that? Did you send out the Branch Director Assistant herself as a warning?"

"..."

As the woman remained silent while turning again toward the elevator door, Inuko erased her smile.

"I see, so that's why you're in such a state of alert. You've devoted yourselves far more to my actions this far and looking for evidence of my report rather than looking for *Shinpu*."

Among the Mushitsuki who belonged to the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, since Inuko had gained the special right to freely travel around the country, there were quite a few people who displayed their wariness of her. Since she had met all sorts of people this far, she was not childish enough to feel resentment at the Branch Director Assistant's upfront impolite attitude.

Inuko was angry for a completely different reason.

Why are the SEPB so passive toward the Original Three—

Although the organization known as the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau feared Mushitsuki, they made no attempt to touch their originators which were the Original Three. The Central Headquarters actively gathered information only regarding *Sanbikime*, while each branch only wanted them to leave the areas under their jurisdiction as soon as possible.

"—I will give you a single piece of advice as a special service."

Inuko's raincoat rippled. Sparks scattered from the button on the wall in response to a sudden magnetic field disruption.

While the other woman gazed at her with a start, Inuko directed a fierce smile at her.

"You are the second person to stand before me without any escort or

anything while knowing of my past as *Asagi*. The first was the woman you've called incompetent just now—the Acting Branch Director Goroumaru. If you want to live long will you trust me just like her and bring out about a dozen escorts from now on?"

Thud, the elevator reached the first floor along with this heavy impact. It probably landed with more force than the usual due to it being pulled by Inuko's magnetism.

Noticing the abnormality, guards immediately rushed there. They reached for their guns.

"I will attack you for self-defense even before you're able to draw that. Not only will bullets not work on me, missiles probably won't, either."

As she glared at them, the guards seemed as stiff as if they had been paralyzed. Inuko's magnetism could obviously alter the trajectory of bullets, and it possessed enough power to destroy the sensors of missiles.

Inuko boarded the elevator with her raincoat fluttering. Yet the other woman didn't move even an inch from that spot.

As the Branch Director Assistant stood in place with a pale face, Inuko pulled her arms and forcibly brought her into the elevator.

"Are you that scared of being closed in an elevator with a kid like me? I don't know what floor the Branch Director is on, so press the button already. You were the one who said we should hurry."

As she kicked the elevator with her boots, the Branch Director Assistant's shoulders trembled. Shaking in fear, her body didn't move the way she wanted it to.

"Do press it already. Do press it."

No matter how many times she kicked the elevator, the Branch Director Assistant didn't move. "P-please cease this..." she commanded her with a feeble voice, but Inuko kept kicking the wall while calling her to "do press it!"

"How incompetent of you to be unable pressing a single button. And since you're incompetent there shouldn't be any problem even if you were to break."

Inuko reached for the hockey stick on her back expressionlessly. The Branch Director Assistant's face distorted in fear.

Once she was truly angry, she couldn't stop—

That was Inuko's characteristic as a pure warrior. During the period she had belonged to the fighting squad, there were times when she was covered in the blood of both enemies and allies, and not just once or twice.

Normally she was a cool-headed warrior, but when angry she became a ferocious berserker.

"You failed."

It happened just as she was about to unsheathe her stick while glaring at the deathly pale Assistant.

Thump—

Inuko's heart leapt.

"...!"

Widening her eyes, she looked at her feet.

That wave I've felt just now—

Inuko, having lost control of herself in anger, came to her senses along with the quickening of her pulse.

"No way...!"

Her entire body was covered in goosebumps.

Inuko's ability to sense abnormal magnetic fields perceived a large wave from far under her feet. And once she had felt a certain wave, unless a considerable time has passed she would never mistake it.

Immediately after this, a piercing alarm resounded through the building.

An announcement notifying of damage to the building echoed, and the countdown to operate the partition walls in each floor started. Red warning lamps were turned on, and the power to the civilian-use elevator Inuko boarded was cut off.

"W-what...? What is going—"

Ignoring the flustered Branch Director Assistant, Inuko clicked her tongue.

"The Mushitsuki members are underground, right? What Rank is the strongest member of this Branch?"

"Huh? W-why would you ask..."

"Do answer!"

Being rebuked, the Assistant replied with a frightened face.

"R-Rank 5...! Right now they're holding a briefing underground regarding their next mission—"

"How weak. —They've already been finished off."

The waves of the Mushitsuki she could feel from below ground were vanishing one after another.

As the Branch Director Assistant widened her eyes, her figure was concealed by something resembling a black mist and grew blurry.

"...! Ah... ah..."

Smoke-like black particles—a miasma poured out from the floor at their feet. When the miasma touched the Assistant's face it instantly lost all color. The guards and the receptionists were being drained the same way.

Mental Pollution...! This is bad, those without any specialized training wouldn't be able to resist—

Inuko's expression toughened. She rotated the hockey stick she drew off her back and stood on guard.

"I'll make the building my domain. It's going to sting a little but please bear with it."

Widening her eyes, Inuko deployed her ability.

"Uh...!"

With Inuko in its center, a ripple of purple lightning expanded. Blown by the impact rushing around the entire building, the Branch Director Assistant and

guardsmen grimaced.

The miasma that covered their entire vision burst as if blown away by wind. The polluted domain was offset by Inuko's expanding domain. Everyone except for Inuko who wore an insulating raincoat was shocked by the static electricity she produced, but that was better than having their minds polluted.

"...!"

A chill ran through Inuko's body.

The subject of the chill moved. As if stabbing through her toes and up to her brain, the polluting wave ascended from underground to the surface. It probably had other ways to go to the higher floors even other than the staff-use elevator.

"You're in the way. Get off."

Grabbing the Branch Director Assistant's collar, she flung her outside the open door. "Eeek!" the woman raised a shriek and Inuko spoke at her.

"Do check out the damage quickly. Shelter all the civilians inside the building outside immediately. Find the members from below who are unhurt, form a team that could move at any time and make them stay in standby. Right this instant."

"Wha... wha..."

"Give it a rest and do understand the situation already, you moron. This branch is being attacked."

Equipping the goggles hanging from her neck, she looked up at the elevator's ceiling.

"I, *Asagi*, will now commence annihilation."

The Assistant's astonished face was gone behind the wall that appeared instantly.

Inuko used her ability to make the elevator ascend immediately. She caused the magnetic fields of the floor and the elevator, which stayed with its door open, to become of the same pole and repulse one another, using that the climb up the building in a speed of 10 kmph.

Reaching the same altitude as the wave she'd felt didn't take even 3 seconds. She reversed the poles of the elevator and the reinforced steel around, making it instantly stop. She also didn't forget to alter her own body's magnetic pole to match the elevator's to protect herself from bumping her head against the ceiling due to inertia.

By repulsing away the building-side door, her field of vision opened immediately.

Inuko reached the highest floor. Emergency lights blinked through the passageway and the alarm rang in the highest possible volume.

Gas came pouring in from the holes in the ceiling.

Realizing it was sleeping gas, she covered her mouth with a scarf. The automatic system probably considered her an enemy due to her forceful way of arriving there.

"—So it's further inside."

The figure of Inuko standing on guard inside the elevator vanished while leaving an afterimage. By making the iron bars embedded beneath the floor repulse her body she teleported ahead.

The countdown by the mechanical voice reached zero. One after another partition walls began blocking up the corridors.

Inuko who moved in high speeds ran through the passageway exactly before it was blocked.

As she approached the source of the wave, the overly powerful wave hit Inuko's body.

The air became uncomfortable and sticky.

It was a foul wave that almost made her choke.

"I can't feel any Mushitsuki being born..."

Heading towards the door at the end of the corridor, Inuko swung her hockey stick. With a large magnetic field enveloping it, the stick pulverized the wooden big door to pieces.

Suddenly, a fearsome miasma blew around.

It was a spacious room that had an expensive-seeming foreign-made table inside.

A large amount of people were collapsed in the carpeted room. Figures that seemed like Mushitsuki with SEPB equipment were also there. Yet they all seemed to be unconscious.

In the center of the room a middle-aged man wearing a business suit was collapsed. She realized it was the Branch Director from the fact she could see traces that the other members had tried to protect him.

A bundle of crushed paper bags were pinned under a collapsed bookshelf. From inside the ripped paper bags Inuko could see crushed lollipops. These were the candies supposed to have been supplied to her.

"What's your goal here—"

With this gruesome sight right in front of her eyes, Inuko confronted the figure standing in the center of the room.

"*Shinpu...!*"

A cracked metallic sound rang through the highest floor.

It was the foul sound of a bell.

The sound of the curse Inuko had heard when she was turned into a Mushitsuki.

"So thou choose to inquire about mine purpose, my child..."

The one looking down on the other man who was stretched out as if offering himself as a sacrifice to some god—the completely changed figure of the Branch Director Inuko was supposed to have met with, was a person clad in a black robe.

A sudden gust of wind blew from the window that had been thrown open.

The filthy robe fluttered, and the man's concealed face was revealed for an instant.

"Thou should consider it a warning... as well as revenge."

Inuko opened her eyes wide.

"W-what's going on...?"

A black robe and a hoarse voice... and the face of an old man.

These were the special features of one of the Prototype Mushi as designated by the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau, *Shinpu*. Even Inuko herself, as one turned into a Mushitsuki by him, remembered his appearance.

And the wave she felt was also that of *Shinpu*.

Yet the one in front of Inuko's eyes was—

"Henceforth thou should fear my very shadow, mortals..."

The one looking at Inuko with his pupil-less, wriggling white eyes, was a pale-faced *young man*. For an instant she could see caterpillars crawling around as well as a blue shirt and a black necktie inside the robe.

"Y-you... who are you...?"

Inuko's dry mutter echoed in the room smelling of blood.

2.04 Inuko Part 3

Special Type Mushitsuki were created by one of the Prototype Mushi, *Shinpu*.

Shishidou Inuko was also a Special Type Mushitsuki. When she was young, she had been enticed by *Shinpu* and became a Mushitsuki.

The real face hidden behind Shinpu's dirty hood was that of a hunchbacked old man. Special Type Mushitsuki other than Inuko also gave out the same testimony, and so did the extremely few civilian eyewitnesses. Because of that the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau had acknowledged the form of an old man as *Shinpu*'s true body.

Yet just now visible under the robe was a young man one would find hard to call old. Since the color of his skin was ghastly dark she couldn't conclude his race, but there was no way to mistake his apparent age.

"You're... not *Shinpu*...?"

Clenching her hockey stick, Inuko stood still in shock.

At the start of the year, Inuko personally heard from a friend that *Shinpu* had been defeated.

That friend wasn't someone who would lie. Because of that, she thought it was suspicious that Special Type Mushitsuki were still being produced in this city.

She could understand the situation if *Shinpu* was simply still alive. But that his form changed like that was completely outside of Inuko's expectations.

"I do remember thee... The child borne by my first fragment..."

Shinpu took a step back from the cruelly shredded body of the Branch Director.

"Long ago, while in the depths of despair, thou hast embraced an

unattainable dream... And even now that it has passed, thou seem to struggle and suffer..."

The man's smiling face was concealed by his robe again. She could hear the hoarse voice just like before, but the man's mouth barely moved.

The foul sound of a bell reverberated.

Black miasma came pouring out with *Shinpu* in its center.

A building with a pointed roof could be faintly seen in the midst of the miasma filling the room. The summit of this crumbling structure was equipped with a rusted bell that slowly moved back and forth.

"...!"

Inuko immediately leapt back and focused her mind.

It was clearly one of *Shinpu*'s abilities, the "Church". Most people would end up being pulled into an isolated domain and lose their minds.

"Don't think you can eat me so easily now... *Shinpu*!"

Swinging her hockey stick, Inuko unleashed her ability.

The one to establish the proper methods to concentrate against mental intervention was none other than Inuko herself. Preserving her sense of self with a powerful will, she shook off the sense of intoxication which was much like drowsiness.

The image of the church rising within the fog was offset by Inuko's expanded magnetic field domain. Static electricity surged through the surface of her raincoat.

"You said this was a warning and revenge. Do explain what you mean by that. Why have you attacked this branch?"

Inuko and *Shinpu* faced each other as their two domains clashed.

"Also, what do you mean by a fragment? Answer me before I destroy you by my hands."

With his robe swaying, *Shinpu* grew farther from Inuko little by little.

"How dare thou ask this of me, O Special Environmental Preservation

Bureau..."

"...!"

"I am the only one still fettered... Neither Elviolene nor Aria Varei, but only I alone was captured, both in the past and now..."

The smile vanished from *Shinpu*'s mouth. The miasma filling the room became even denser.

"Elviolene...? Aria Varei...?"

Still preserving her battle stance, Inuko started thinking quickly.

"Captured, you say... you can't possibly mean you were captured by the SEPB? But right now you're in front of my eyes—"

She started saying but then became speechless. She shuddered at the conclusion she was able to reach.

"Just now you said fragment... N-no way..."

Her throat became dry and the voice she wrung out was husky. She felt cold sweat form on her whole body, and even the hand grasping the hockey stick was shaking a little.

—*No, I can't conclude anything yet.*

Inuko was not simple enough to just accept information handed by her enemy without questioning it. Yet the conjecture rising to her mind was enough to make her feel shaken.

"Only I was deprived of my freedom... And the only fragment I had been able to unleash from the very beginning was destroyed by the child of Aria..."

Inuko's heart started beating rapidly.

Her friend that had told her he defeated Shinpu was a Fusion Type Mushitsuki created by *Sanbikime*.

So did that mean *Sanbikime*'s true name was Aria Varei? If so, then Elviolene would be the real name of *Oogui*.

Slowly but surely, the facts and *Shinpu*'s words started fitting together inside Inuko's mind.

She was about to touch on a huge secret related to Mushi and Mushitsuki—

"Yet I have obtained a chance..."

A chance?

Just as Inuko was about to ask this, the miasma began retreating away from her like an ocean's receding wave.

Shinpu jumped lightly and stood at the open window.

"As long as thou continue to confine me, thou shall fear my revenge for all eternity..."

Leaving a grating sound behind, the filthy robe flung its body outside the window. The caterpillars spread on the floor also followed and fell outside.

"W-wait!"

Inuko immediately followed, standing near the window.

She could see a robe-clad form mixed in the darkness going along the surface of the building's wall as if sliding down on it. The many caterpillars were also brought along and they fell toward Holland City.



"I won't let you get away—"

Just as Inuko was about to also fling herself out of the window, a shriek rose from behind her.

There was probably some other route to reach that room; as Inuko turned around, she could see the late arriving Branch Director Assistant fall on her butt on the floor. Having the collapsed unmoving Branch Director in front of her eyes, she became lost for words.

Accompanying her were members who wore the SEPB equipment made of long coats and goggles. Judging by their movements they seemed to belong to the battle squad, but as expected seeing the attack in front of their eyes made them freeze.

Inuko clicked her tongue. She couldn't spare the time to explain the situation.

"I will pursue *Shinpu*, the one who had assaulted the Branch. You all evacuate to a safe place. You might also be targeted."

She asserted this quickly, gazing at the paper bags crushed by the collapsed shelf.

"..."

The candies prepared for Inuko were all crushed with no exception. She apparently had to give up on them.

Turning around, she leapt out of the window.

The night's damp air blew all over her body, and she began a free-fall toward Holland City's nightscape.

"Revenge, huh...?"

Inuko's eyes caught the robed figure that landed on the ground through her goggles. Jumping over walls, she moved heading for the town center.

She had never heard of Shinpu assaulting a branch so far. He himself admitted it to be an act of revenge.

The Original Three were supernatural beings whose actions and thoughts couldn't be understood by humans. Or at least that was what they thought so

far.

"Aren't you just like a human, *Shinpu*...!"

Something was changing—

She had this premonition.

It all began during last Christmas Eve, when *Fuyuhotaru* had escaped from the East Central Branch's housing facility. Since Lady Bird, one of the few Rank 1 Mushitsuki, had died, the power balance of the opposing organization crumbled.

Until now large battles unfolded around the Central Headquarters and East Central Branch. But perhaps they were growing enough to involve the entire country.

"—Seems like I'll have to sneak into Central Headquarters after I finish my business here."

A moment before she crashed into the ground, Inuko expanded her own domain and generated a magnetic field. By repulsing herself from the metal pipes embedded underground she rapidly decelerated, landing with her coat fluttering.

"If what *Shinpu* said is true, then just like I thought... If even the *Shinpu* in front of my eyes is *not the real one*—then that means Central Headquarters are hiding it."

She would sneak into the Central Headquarters and ascertain the hidden truth.

She would probably risk her life. Yet as Inuko knew the Central Headquarters well and was ripened by long years of battle experience there was no one else who could do the job.

"That will probably be... my final job."

Jumping over walls as well, she teleported in pursuit of *Shinpu*.

"For that as well, I will defeat you right here and now."

Shrouded by purple lightning, Inuko moved instantly to above *Shinpu*'s robed

head. While floating upside-down in the air, she brandished her hockey stick.

The pedestrians walking on the road raised a scream.

It was firmly forbidden to use the powers of a Mushitsuki in front of a crowd. Yet Inuko judged the annihilation of the Prototype Mushi in front of her eyes more important than keeping protocol.

Her hockey stick ripped the filthy robe from overhead.

"My child... I have no intention of destroying thee..."

The torn robe floated midair along with the caterpillars, clinging to the roadside streetlights. The miasma-emitting robe began being restored, and *Shinpu's* form returned above the light.

"Thou should leave quietly... Otherwise, I shall not overlook it despite thy being my child."

"What was the chance you've obtained?"

Ignoring *Shinpu's* words, Inuko teleported toward the streetlight. She aimed at him from the ground, using the momentum from her soaring to swing her stick.

The metal-made streetlight was sliced into two. Glass fragments scattered around, making pedestrians run away.

"The chance I have obtained was thy arrogance... Thou have invited chaos as a result of thy attempt to make use of mine fragment, and so I was able to unleash a new one..."

"...!"

Shinpu leapt high, standing on the wall of a high-rising building on the other side of the road.

Inuko also teleported toward that building. She ran in pursuit of the fleeing *Shinpu* accompanied by the caterpillars the same way by running above the metal-made windows.

No way—

She intuitively discerned the meaning of Shinpu's words.

When Inuko had visited the East Central Branch, the incident of Fuyuhotaru's escape from the Central Headquarters happened.

Inuko heard about the fine details in secret from Acting Branch Director Goroumaru.

She was told that the Central Headquarters was holding some sort of experiment. Yet there was some incident during that experiment and several people escaped. It had apparently been revealed to the East Central Branch from a "disk" that had recorded the chaos of that time.

"Is the chance you're talking about the experiment conducted at the Central Headquarters...?"

"—I was able to unleash yet another fragment on the world other than those inhabiting the two vessels connected to the King of Mushitsuki..."

Shinpu's wicked smile affirmed Inuko's conjecture.

"Mine old fragment has vanished, and now that my new one is unleashed... I can both take revenge on thee mortals as well as devour thee to my heart's content... I shall indulge in thy fear as I slowly await for the King to release me..."

The King of Mushitsuki. It was once again a new term for Inuko.

She couldn't fully believe in what *Shinpu* had said, but the more she heard from him the more it overlapped with the information she possessed.

However, once the Central Headquarters which she belonged to found out she had discovered the truth they were trying to conceal—Inuko would probably be assassinated. There were all sorts of rumors about the suspicious unit known as the Annihilators.

She apparently needed to be careful about her actions from now on.

"I won't let it happen. I'll stop your revenge or whatever."

Asserting this, Inuko teleported near *Shinpu* just as he leapt to another building.

The concrete wall largely caved in. The impact from the accelerating hockey stick burst open the hem of the filthy robe.

Shinpu, evading a direct hit by a paper-thin margin, changed the direction of his movements vertically. He slid heading for the top of the building.

"It's no use if you escape, *Shinpu*."

Clad in purple electricity, Inuko teleported again. She leapt above *Shinpu*, soaring in the night sky.

Her stick, making use of her full body's weight as well as the magnetic field created by her ability, cut in a straight line from the rooftop aiming for the ground.

"I have no intention of even giving you an opening to use your abilities."

Landing on the ground, Inuko rotated her stick and gazed overhead.

There were huge cracks on the wall of the building a few dozen meters tall. *Shinpu* was sent flying with his robes ripped to shreds as if slashed by some fearsome beast's claws.

While Inuko was standing calmly *Shinpu* crashed with the sound of breaking bones. He slowly roused his body above the crushed caterpillars.

"So this wasn't enough to destroy you, huh. But it doesn't seem like physical attacks are completely ineffective."

Shinpu standing on the ground had no right arm. That arm severed by Inuko was surrounded by caterpillars at another spot.

"...As expected..."

New caterpillars carried his right arm. They climbed atop the man's body, attaching themselves to his severed shoulder.

"This vessel cannot withstand my fragment... After all it was but a temporary vessel for me to reach this land..."

"What was that?"

Ignoring Inuko who asked this back, *Shinpu* turned his body around.

As Inuko tried to follow him immediately her field of vision was suddenly distorted.

"—Ugh."

Strength suddenly left her body and she slumped to her knees.

Her vision distorted, and she was assaulted by a severe sense of fatigue.

"...Dammit, do hold on, my body...!"

She grimaced and crunched the candy in her mouth. The sweet flavor spread in her mouth.

"Haah... haah..."

Spitting out the stick, she pulled out a new lollipop with a trembling hand and put it in her mouth.

She licked it and let it stay put for a while. She could feel her consciousness clearing out again.

By healing her physical fatigue, Inuko tried standing up. But this time she felt dizzy and put a hand on the wall. Her vision was dyed by a flash for an instant.

"Ugh...!"

The memories remaining in her rose to her mind one after another. As if the many pictures she had were being shredded from the edges, important parts became blurry and vanished.

It wasn't only her body; her mind was also being exhausted.

"...Damn!"

Leaning against the building's wall, she propped up her body. Her swearing voice echoed in the dark back alley sandwiched between the buildings.

"The time I can fight was reduced again... Why are both my mind and body so worthless..."

She spoke bitterly while holding her brow.

The current Inuko was worn out in both mind and body. Once she had noticed the side-effects of her powerful ability in the past it had already been too late for her body.

Since she had become able to fight only for extremely short periods of time, Inuko had been removed from the battle squad. Although once feared as the best warrior she had been demoted from Rank 2 to Rank 3 and lost her place on

the battlefield.

And that was not all.

Her body, fatigued beyond the point of return, started the countdown towards its end. As if she was holding a time bomb.

"...Not yet."

Grinding her molars, Inuko started walking. She stared at *Shinpu*'s figure growing far.

She could feel her dim consciousness being gradually restored. By replenishing her iron, her limbs could finally move freely.

"I will not die here. At least in the end, I will die as a warrior—"

Inuko tried pursuing *Shinpu* again, but suddenly several presences appeared around her.

They were people wearing long coats and goggles. These combatants who numbered more than ten all brought out their Mushi.

"Central Headquarters member *Asagi*, we will have you come with us."

"...What does this mean?"

"There have been orders to detain you. We have also been granted permission to annihilate you should you resist."

The dumbfounded Inuko surveyed the people surrounding her.

"You say what...?"

She turned around, looking at the corner where *Shinpu* was gone. Yet she could no longer see the robe.

I see, he didn't use his abilities to resist so he could prevent me from perceiving his location by his wave—

A lonely smile spread on her face without her noticing.

"Ah, not again..."

More than simple vexation, something like sadness welled up inside her.

I was once again left behind in battle—

Why was that? Although she was supposed to possess everything needed for fighting, she felt like she was always being disturbed by fate.

There's nothing as pitiful as a warrior hated by the battlefield—

"Lower your weapon, *Asagi*."

The members slowly closed in on Inuko. She sighed.

"I have no intention of resisting, but can you tell me the reason? Why have you been ordered to restrain me?"

"The Central Headquarters needs reinforcements. You were the only one to have witnessed *Shinpu*, *Asagi*. We will promptly have you tell us the full story at the branch."

"You failed, you failed. It's not just 0 points, but minus even. What are you speaking about at such a late stage...! Not to mention, why are you prioritizing the interrogation of a member over the annihilation of *Shinpu*! Why do you think East Central Branch Acting Director Goroumaru changed the chain of command? It was for such times so we could refuse the orders of the Headquarters and have every branch make independent decisions, playing it by ear!"

While Inuko spat out this tirade, the color of the members' faces changed. They clearly grew tenser and on guard.

"—Ah, it's fine. I'm tired of having to suppress my anger. If you want to restrain me or whatever, do what you want."

Inuko was about to return the hockey stick to her back. Relief started spreading among the members.

"—No, wait."

She once again checked the direction *Shinpu* had gone to.

Disappointment in herself—a feeling that should have been gone long ago—was reborn.

She gathered power in her limbs. Her stamina and mental energy were both quite restored.

"I changed my mind. I'm going. If you want to stop me, do come at me with your full strength!"

As Inuko grinned, a disturbance ran through the long coats.

She ignored the members that assumed battle positions and brought out her cellphone. Pushing in the proper number, the other party soon answered.

"Yo, it's me. ...Hmm, good work. Sorry for this just as you've finished today's menu, but I've added a little something for you."

It didn't matter if a warrior liked battle or not.

What was important was fate.

Being loved by battle or not. It was irrelevant to the person's intentions.

Just like I thought that boy has the making to become the strongest warrior—

Feeling this intuitively, she was about to shudder.

"Are you listening? You're going to be playing tag. Soon a man wearing black clothes will be heading to where you're at. He's called *Shinpu*. You should be able to see him and understand who he is at a glance."

They were apparently able to feel Inuko's hostile intentions. The long coats' Mushi attacked her all at once.

"Catch that guy. Once you do that, today's training will be over."

Inuko's raincoat became shrouded in purple lightning.

"Hmm? If you can talk back then get going already. Ah, you can use your motorbike. Don't forget what I've taught you. What'll happen if you let him escape, you ask? Well, it won't end pretty for you. I'll beat you up nice and good so that you won't be able to push food down your throat for three days. Oh right, let me warn you about something."

Inuko's voice talking in the phone mixed with countless screams in the back alley.

"Do be careful not to die. This is it, good luck."

Just as she hanged the call, the purple lightning surging through her entire body dispersed.

She rotated her hockey stick and returned it to her back.

"Forgive me for breaking one or two of your bones. You should even be thanking me for settling this without killing anyone."

In the span of several seconds, the long coats all yielded without anyone remaining.

"All of you failed."

Asserting this shortly, Inuko went in pursuit of *Shinpu*.

2.05 Shachito Part 3

A So1o's engine sounds resounded at the parking lot of a family restaurant facing the national highway along the sea.

"Yeah yeah, additional menu. I got it."

Shachito, who wore a coat on top of his jersey, turned on the throttle while smiling. The momentum caused his helmet to slide back, tightening the strap on his neck.

"I have no idea who that *Shimpu* guy is, but seems like I just need to find him and chase after him."

In contrast to his casual tone, Shachito took action quickly. The accelerating motorbike flew to the national highway.

Ever since meeting the girl known as Shishidou Inuko he spent all his time on training. She threatened him that ignoring her orders would lead to him being imprisoned by the organization known as the SEPB or whatever, and so did whatever she pleased with him.

The first thing he was taught was how to leverage his abilities as a Mushitsuki. She spoke to Shachito endlessly about how he could make maximum use of his ability. At times she would sneak into his house, and continued her "lectures" all of the time except for the moment just before he went to sleep and immediately after he woke up.

Next came the running course she called "basic training". Apparently by running while using his ability he would be able to naturally combine his movements with his Mushitsuki ability—but basically it was just a pain. He had been made to run stupidly long distances, and at times Inuko even chased him on her Vespa.

And she smacked him. Every time she found him loafing around, she would

end up hitting him with her hockey stick, no questions asked. Obviously he was no match for Inuko, so the number of bruises on his body kept increasing.

"Yeah yeah, I will do it. Yes, I'm serious about this."

He rode his beloved vehicle full speed heading for the town center. The family restaurant was the starting point as well as the goal of today's running course.

"—But I can't do anything if I don't meet up with that guy, right. I REALLY wanted to see that *Shinpu*-san guy and chase him but what can I do..."

While muttering this monotonously, he kept his distance from the family restaurant.

The strongest warrior? That sorta thing has nothing to do with me— "Now I'll just go back home."

These feelings never changed ever since the day he had yielded to Shishidou Inuko.

Since he couldn't get back at Inuko for now, he simply pretended to listen to her orders.

He fully intended on resigning from her silly training the moment he got an idea of how to run away from her.

"Hah... if only that raincoat girl shut up and put on some normal clothes she'd be cute. She could even compete with Rio-chan."

He sighed. He wondered if saying something like this so naturally was what made people see him as a playboy.

Anyhow, with that today's training was over. So he decided.

"That *Shinpu* fella won't come this far. Ah, I'm SO hungry..."

Leaving the coastland road, he entered the parking lot of a fast-food place in the town center. He took off his helmet and removed his goggles.

"...Oh."

As he got off his motorcycle something in his pocket vibrated. He took out his cellphone and opened the LCD screen.

He received 23 emails.

Again he accumulated emails he couldn't reply to.

—Heeey, why're you skipping school? Are you sick? Are you alive?

—You're unsociable lately! Actually, have you forgotten about our band practice?

—What's up with you, weren't you going to the event?! I'll punch your head off the next time we meet!

—Is it true you're down with the flu? Should I visit?

—Yo, playboy! How could you ignore our mixer despite being a playboy! Where are you hanging out!

—We are deciding on the schedule for our trip during spring break! Please tell us which days are good for you!

"As I thought I fit better in 'this side'."

He felt relieved just by looking at his emails.

Shishidou Inuko, fighting, training, Mushi... a completely normal person like himself shouldn't be concerned with such an abnormal world.

Shachito obviously belonged to the world over there.

Spending his days enjoyably without thinking of anything agreed with him.

"..."

—*Do you have anything you want to do, like a dream?*

The one who said this was Masaki Rio. When seen from the point of view of a person who had a clear goal like her, it might seem like he was living half-heartedly.

"...It's fine. I'll just stay like that."

And so Shachito had no intention to change his current self.

—Let's celebrate the first email! By the way, Rio-chan, are you the type to go to the cafeteria? Or the type to bring a bento? Since we couldn't hang out let me treat you out for lunch. I'll show you the special menu that only I know about since I'm on good terms with the lunch lady!

Before replying to his friends, he sent an email to Rio's address. He purposely mentioned nothing about them meeting up in town during the evening. If that didn't receive any response, he would stop making a pass at her.

Why was he so bothered about Rio when he'd met her only a handful of times?

Even he couldn't quite understand.

"For some reason I just can't leave her be."

Putting the cellphone aside, he got off his motorbike. He thought of replying to the other mails while eating something. At any rate he had to get something into his stomach; he felt more likely to faint of hunger than of fatigue.

"...!"

Yet as Shachito tried to enter the restaurant, a black shadow passed in his line of sight.

A shadow with a black, fluttering cloth slid next to the side of a building on the other side of the road.

A robed figure moved through the city at night with movements impossible for humans.

It happened only for a split second.

Yet the moment he witnessed this, Shachito's time stopped.

Rising to his mind was a white room. He could see the figure of a boy covered in a blanket shuddering. He hugged his own body and faintly moved his pale lips.

—This is unfair, why do only I have to...

A cracked sound echoed next to the boy widening his eyes.

It was an ear-grating, metallic sound that seemed to pierce through his eardrums. The boy shuddered in surprise and raised his face that was distorted by rage and hatred.

The white room was encroached by black fog. The air inside became foul as if he was dragged into another dimension.

The next moment, the boy stood in front of a tattered and crumbling building – a "church".

The one looking down at the boy who stood still was a monster that had its face hidden by a filthy robe— "...Hihah."

Shachito was brought out of his daydreaming by the sound of his own laughter.

He unconsciously pointed at the figure running on the building's wall.

He felt as if he was about to recall something important. But he also had the premonition that it was something he mustn't remember.

Shachito's field of vision became dyed in orange. He rapidly expanded the scope of his ability.

Autumn Darters flew out of the objects around, like buildings and cars. His vision was filled with tens and hundreds of these Mushi.

The orange-colored Autumn Darters turned into flashes of light. Shining spears stabbed into the black robe.

The main street shook.

The black robe crashed with frightening force, shaving off the wall of a building and causing the ground to cave in.

With the sound of meat and bone being crushed echoing from the black robe, the orange light dispersed.

"Hihaha!"

Lowering his finger, Shachito wore a twisted smile.

—He felt the scent of battle.

The filthy robe that appeared in front of his eyes was without any doubt connected to the battlefield.

The Shachito of "that side" that had awakened once through battle now felt the temptation to return to it.

"Yes, yes! Yahoo, he fell like a brick. Heeey, are ya still alive?"

In the battlefield was the "pain" Shachito had completely forgotten.

The other Shachito had come to know of that fact—

"Hihah! No reply!"

Putting his hand on his forehead as if gazing afar, he looked to the area where the asphalt caved in.

Yet the curious onlookers were in the way and so he couldn't see it well.

"Welp, gotta go check it then... wait, what?"

He wore his goggles and mounted his motorbike. But as he tried turning the throttle, he noticed he had no grip strength. —Since he'd used his ability without thinking of the consequences he became extremely exhausted in both mind and body. He couldn't gather power in his dominant arm.

"Hmm..."

Tilting his head, he pounded his hand on the handlebar countless times. He couldn't feel any pain. When his skin was ripped and blood dripped to the ground he finally retrieved his sensations.

"Hihaha!"

Smiling, Shachito again turned the throttle. The suddenly rotating wheel raised smoke as the So1o leapt out of the fast food restaurant's parking lot.

"Oh, now we're talking!"

The black robe smoothly slipped out from between the onlookers. He apparently couldn't be seen by normal people. Shachito chased after him.

His other self that loathed fighting seemed like a lie.

With his fatigue also gone, power was overflowing from the depths of his body. He was assaulted by the impulse to release his ability as soon as possible. While driving at reckless speeds, he called toward the robed figure that ran along the sidewalk.

"Heeey, are you that *Shinpu* Inuko'd told me about? We're supposed to be playing tag for some reason. Are, you, alright?"

"..."

"Uha! I've been ignored! Well, since I'm the one messing with you it's fine. By the way—"

After lightly tapping his forehead, Shachito raised a thin smile.

"—Haven't we met somewhere?"

He cast a sharp glance at Shinpu.

Yes, Shachito had seen this filthy robe before. That memory and premonition caused his personality to make a complete change.

The Shachito that led a normal life and the Shachito that appeared during battle.

The boundary between these two Shachitos was growing vague. —But even while he abandoned himself to this stimulation, some part of him deep inside was still thinking rationally.

"Hast thou yielded thyself to insanity, my child...? Do not involve with me..."

Turning right at the sidewalk, *Shinpu* leapt into an alley sandwiched between high-rise buildings.

"No, it's just that... I just get the feeling I've given you something really important."

Without pulling the brakes, Shachito turned the throttle even further. Orange Autumn Darters flew from Shachito and his motorbike.

He reached with his hand to grab a streetlight.

The motorbike held between his legs rode on empty air. With their mass brought down to near zero, Shachito and the motorbike became as if they were made of paper. Even the momentum created by the speed of several kmph was practically equal to nil.

Changing their direction nonstop, he finally let his hand go from the streetlight. As Shachito and the motorbike landed and rushed into a narrow alley, the Autumn Darters returned to them. Now that it retrieved its former mass, the So1o kept pursuing after *Shinpu*.

"Won't ya give it back to me?"

He pointed at the robed man running ahead with his index and middle finger.

The Autumn Darters leaping out of the surrounding objects stabbed into *Shinpu*. Since his mass was multiplied several times his running speed was drastically lowered.

"—I hope you're still alive."

Bringing up its front wheel, the So1o pressed on the back of *Shinpu*'s head. A normal person would be instantly killed getting run over by a motorcycle at that speed.

"...Thou fool."

As the robe turned around, the pupil-less eyes hidden inside gazed at Shachito. A black fog—a miasma filled the surroundings and an innumerable number of white caterpillars crawled on the ground.

The swarm of caterpillars swelled and they all flung Shachito to the air.

"Woah..."

An Autumn Darter split from the So1o flying high. By grabbing an electric line and rotating once, Shachito made his motorbike land on the top of the slender electric cables.

"That's so gross. What's that? Your ability?"

Shinpu wordlessly looked up at Shachito gazing down at him from above.

"But you seem weaker than Inuko."

"Dost thou bear a grudge against me for saving thy young self...?"

Accompanied by his white caterpillars, *Shinpu* ran inside the gloomy alley. — Not wanting to use his ability, or perhaps completely ignoring Shachito, he appeared to have no intention of fighting head-on.

"No no. I feel like I really suffered because of you."

Jumping down from the cable, he pursued *Shinpu*.

Continuing to turn through the narrow alleyways, they ran around the town center.

"I won't letcha escape."

He pointed his finger at Shinpu who was trying to climb the wall of a building.

The Autumn Darter flash stabbed into him. With its weight amplified, the robed figure collapsed to the ground. The Autumn Darter separated from *Shinpu* and next stabbed into Shachito.

Now possessing several times its weight, the motorbike rushed toward *Shinpu*. Different from earlier, he wasn't thrown away by the caterpillars or anything.

"Thou shall regret this..."

Perhaps resigned, *Shinpu* stood still. He changed the orientation of his body and stared directly at Shachito from the front.

A tidal wave of caterpillars poured out from inside the filthy robe.

"Ugeh!"

The wave of caterpillars crashed on Shachito as he grimaced in revulsion. The motorbike's tires caught on them and tumbled.

Having his whole body gnawed by the caterpillars' mouthparts, Shachito crashed into the ground while keeping his momentum.

"Hihah!"

As his skin was getting bitten off and his shoulder hit the ground—a throbbing impulse rose from the depths of Shachito's body.

Pain.

A sweet, numbing sensation that he could feel faintly.

Shachito was convinced.

His sense of pain that he had forgotten at some point...

The one who had left it behind was, without any doubt, the Shachito of "this side"—the part of him as a Mushitsuki born by intoxication in the midst of battle.

An orange Autumn Darter rose from Shachito's body.

"Too baad."

While rolling around violently due to the impact after falling down, Shachito struck the ground with his palm.

The next moment he took a high leap. Unable to follow the speed of his jump, the caterpillars that clung to his body were all shaken off.

Attaching both legs to the wall of the building, he sank his body low.

"But I'm stronger when I don't ride my motorbike."

The next moment, Shachito leapt over the caterpillars, diving toward *Shinpu*'s chest. He grabbed his robe and kicked the ground.

In the blink of an eye Shachito took *Shinpu* and jumped over the building. Their bodies were enveloped by an orange glow.

"Let's go!"

As though he was a baseball pitcher, Shachito swung *Shinpu* around and flung him with all of his power at the ground.

A tremor shook the back alley.

Looking at the dark alley from a high altitude, he could see a white ripple expanding. The large amounts of caterpillars were scattered and *Shinpu* was crushed on top of the ground.

—Shachito, think of using your ability for battle just like I do.

Inuko had taught him how to use his ability. He grasped how to control the movement of masses accurately as well as the delicate timing required for it.

Shachito could turn his own weight from zero to all the way over hundreds of kilograms.

—What's important is your initial velocity. Originally it would've been proportionate to the size of your mass, so to increase your initial speed you'd require a lot of energy. The power needed to shoot a bullet out of a peashooter and out of a gun is different.

Inuko's lecture was difficult and full of logic.

—You, however, can use the power of a peashooter to obtain the strength of a

cannon. Although the acceleration of someone starting to run is dependent on their leg strength, if their weight was zero their speed would become immeasurable. After gaining enough initial velocity, you need to next increase your weight. This means you can 'teleport' around just like me, and by applying the same principles on your enemy you can produce a dreadful destructive power.

Although Shachito couldn't understand it with his head, Inuko made him go through hell to pound it into his body. Even while running normally and applying his ability, he could use the minimal amount of power to achieve the maximal effect.

And what happened now was the result of it.

Shachito turned his weight to zero to leap high like a scrap of paper, then amplified his mass to crush *Shinpu* like a squashed frog.

Now that he was able to implement Inuko's teachings, he felt like he couldn't lose to anyone.

"...And done. Wow, you sure flew far... Hihahah."

Shachito landed on the ground, not even raising any sound as if he was made of silk. Not paying any heed either to his ripped clothes or to his bleeding wounds, he approached *Shinpu* defenselessly.

"*Shinpu*-saaan. Are you alive? Shorry if I killed ya."

He was finally able to understand Inuko's words about the strongest warrior.

Shachito was strong.

No. From now on he would grow much, much stronger.

There was nothing in this world that Shachito couldn't break—

An ear-grating metallic sound reverberated around.

It was the sound of a bell.

A darkish miasma began pouring out from the sprawled *Shinpu*. The air around became more and more foul every time the bell rang.

"...!"

Shachito erased his thin smile.

The black domain that encroached anything and everything already reached his feet. He tried immediately using his ability to evade but couldn't activate it.

"Ugh...!"

He thought he had defeated *Shinpu*, so he completely lowered his guard. The domain that should have been under Shachito's control was being completely swallowed by the pressurizing miasma.

He looked up to the sky.

Even the starry sky he had seen earlier was being infringed by the miasma.

What appeared instead, spreading out on the entire surface of the sky, was the image of a large building. On the pointed roof at the summit of the crumbling, decaying structure was a rusted bell that hung from it.

It was the Church.

Although it didn't have any cross, the structure that appeared within the miasma was undoubtedly a church.

"...Thou shall regret thy foolishness, my child..."

The miasma crawled up Shachito's feet.

"Ua...AAAHHH!"

He felt as if his consciousness was being ripped away from him. He was assaulted by an immense exhaustion, falling to his knees.

But just before Shachito's heart completely succumbed...

"—You were carried away and got careless, you moron."

The miasma covering Shachito was bisected by a purple flash.

The hazy Shachito couldn't tell what was happening.

The scene unfolding in front of his eyes...

The only thing he could tell was that it was caused by a powerful and refined warrior.

"But I'll praise you for making *Shinpu* use his ability. Thanks to that I was able

to sense this location."

The bisected miasma was splitting further and further. The only thing Shachito could see was a silhouette moving freely through this vast range without ever stopping in *Shinpu's* domain.

"I'll destroy you this time, *Shinpu*."

Every time that silhouette tore through the darkness, the figure of the church reflected on the sky also grew thinner.

"You should regret having given birth to warriors like us."

An intense magnetic field that made even the air itself shake cut the Church into two.

The girl landed on ground, her yellow raincoat fluttering. She rotated the hockey stick in her hands once and returned it to her back.

The bell sounds ceased.

The miasma torturing Shachito was also gone. Breathing heavily, he leaned with both hands on the ground.

"Hah...! Hah...!"

At the feet of the raincoat girl—Shishidou Inuko, a lone man was collapsed.

Shachito—the Shachito that retrieved his sanity, felt his heart throbbing as if he had been slapped. No matter how one looked at him, it didn't seem like he was breathing.

"...Ugh!"

He felt nauseous and cowered.

It was different from when he had first met Inuko. He could clearly remember what he did this time—he killed *Shinpu* as if he were a piece of trash.

What the hell was up with that... was it really me?

He grimaced and looked at the man's corpse.

I killed—

"Please calm down. You didn't kill him. No matter how you look at it—"

Seeing Shachito's state, Inuko kicked the dead man's face.

Looking the cadaver straight in the eyes, Shachito was shocked. He felt like vomiting again.

"It doesn't look like he died very recently."

As Shachito averted his eyes from the festering, putrid corpse, he finally collapsed on the ground. His weak body was enveloped by sleepiness.

"It seems better for now to let the police recover him and gather information. There are still some mysteries remaining, but well, we've completed the first step for now."

Inuko smiled and pointed at Shachito.

"You passed, Shachito."

Shiohara Shachito's "basic training".

—Passed.

2.06 The Others

The performance scheduled to be opened next month was to be carried out in Oranje Land.

Oranje Land illuminated at night was beautiful. The streets lined up with windmills became a resting place for couples and families on trip.

"Nng..."

Jarre held his head and turned around.

It was that sound again. That sound like a cracked metal being him made him feel bad.

In front of his line of sight was one of Oranje Land's facilities, the Concertgebouw. All public performances were inside that hall. Tonight he came there for a preliminary inspection.

"Is something the matter, mister Harissi?"

One the staff members walking with Jarre looked up at him quizzically. Even in his homeland of America he seldom saw people taller than him, but in this country he was even more conspicuous.

"For some reason I've been hearing a horrible sound lately."

"Are you tired perhaps? Let us put some more free time into the schedule."

"No, there's no problem. I've been having headaches since long ago. Also, I would like to coach the actors as much as I can. The last audition is close by, too."

"We truly are glad for you to say this. Even the actors are practicing every day in order to be able to receive your guidance."

His relationship with the Japanese staff was going well.

The actors were also making great efforts in their practice.

For Jarre, who had travelled around the world excavating talent, his meetings with students who could be said to be raw ores were irreplaceable treasures.

Even here in Holland City Jarre had been able to find several students that had talent.

Guiding them into becoming the best actors was his duty.

By Jarre's guidance and the students' efforts, the performance would definitely be a success.

So he was convinced.

"I shall send you to the hotel."

After walking through the windmill road, they could see an escort car parked in the road facing the site.

Jarre looked there and raised a voice of admiration.

"What a magnificent dome."

The staff member's line of sight followed what Jarre was looking at, softening his expression. On the other side of the parked vehicle was an all-weather dome.

It was a combined competition facility built bordering Orange Land. As they were apparently played baseball inside tonight, there were large panels that displayed the emblems of the team playing.

"All of the buildings in this country are beautiful."

He praised them honestly from his heart.

It was a very prosperous country with only small differences between the rich and the poor. Jarre had gone all around the world yet he had never seen such a blessed country. In his homeland of South America the gap between the rich and the poor was considerable, and in his second hometown of the USA there were innumerable slums.

In this country, as long as you worked you could live. Even without choosing a profession most people were able to work, and he heard that even the weak of

society had plenty of assurance.

In such an abundant country what did boys and girl aim for?

This answer was known by none other than Jarre himself.

A dream—

Everyone possessed some sort of future they yearned after.

This country overflowed with possibilities, so they had that many chances.

"I'm jealous of the children born here."

Jarre thought so from the bottom of his heart.

"This country has plenty of possibilities, and everyone shines while trying to obtain them."

The staff's response was varied. There were some who nodded and others who shrugged.

"Sorry for making us stop here. Now, let's go back."

Entering the car's backseat, the staff member in charge of driving also entered in a hurry.

As he revved up the engine, the in-car television was also automatically turned on.

The car took off.

"...o'clock news. First, about the incident where a strange corpse had been found in Holland City—"

Inside the television, men and women who seemed to be newscasters read out from a manuscript.

It seemed to be the news. Jarre couldn't understand Japanese, but the name of "Holland", the city he resided in right now, caught his attention.

Although the Japanese-made LCD television was small as it was made for cars, its picture quality was clear.

A small portrait photo was reflected on the screen. It probably belonged to the victim of some incident.

"It appears that more than 10 days have passed since his death, and there are plans to investigate the cause of his death and other special features in more details during the autopsy. From the personal belongings assumed to be his, the corpse was identified as a 29 years old company worker from Akamaki City. According to eyewitness reports there is the chance that he had been brought all the way to Holland City post-mortem—"

The staff member at the driver's seat who grabbed the wheel peeked into the back mirror.

"They're saying a corpse from Akamaki City is here... It gives me the creeps."

Perhaps he tried breaching the subject since he saw Jarre gazing at the television.

"Yeah."

Saying this briefly, he shifted his gaze from the television to outside the window.

"What if the corpse itself walked here?"

He made a joke that even he didn't find funny. The news weren't related to him after all. He obviously didn't even know the victim.

"Hahaha, like the Walking Dead, was it? There was a movie like that."

It happened just as the staff member laughed.

"...!"

A loud sound shook Jarre's eardrums as if someone hit his head.

It was that sound again.

That cracked metallic sound he felt like he had heard somewhere before. He felt dizzy by the exceedingly ear-grating sound.

"—Really, what a poor guy."

Jarre was startled at this sudden sinister-sounding voice and raised his face.

The face of the driver reflected on the back mirror wore a faint smile. He made an unpleasant expression as if becoming a different person.

Jarre held his aching head, grimacing.

"What are you talking about?"

"About the news. That victim failed in achieving the dream he had since his youth and became a company employee. He probably sank deep in despair."

"...Was that told in the news?"

"Yeah, quite clearly. Ever since he started working he was unable to give up his dream no matter what. Could there even be someone so stubborn?"

Jarre's heart throbbed with a start.

It appeared to him as if something like black smoke was drifting from the driver's shoulder.

Was he smoking? Thinking so he looked at his hands, yet both of them were planted firmly on the steering wheel. There were also no traces of him using an ashtray.

Were his eyes blurry due to his headache? Jarre shook his head and averted his eyes from the back mirror. He didn't want to see the staff member's sinister face any longer.

"...Can we drop this subject? It makes me feel bad."

He felt as if the black mist drifting inside the car was defiling his body and mind. His face reflected on the window looked so pale he barely recognized himself.

"So this is the pitiful ending of a stupid human who'd been unable to give up his dream he had no chances of fulfilling, huh."

"I told you to stop."

Revealing his anger, Jarre glared at the staff member.

He felt discomfort welling up as if he was being criticized.

I'm not like that. My mission is raising talented children into the best actors. I don't regret getting on the stage— He thought of the words he told himself as ridiculous.

He himself who was thinking this knew it better than anyone.

No regrets... Did he merely want to think so and escaped by raising students?

Jarre held his head and scowled.

"However, that might be a happy ending in its own way. There's no point to keep living if you can't give up on your dream."

Not minding Jarre's orders, the staff member continued spewing these words drenched in malice.

Jarre had nowhere to escape to inside the closed car. His expression once revealed anger, but it was gradually growing frailer.

"Stop. Stop it..."

That sound echoed again.

I... by comparing myself to the talented students, was I merely trying to fulfill my own dream...?

Every time he heard the cracked metallic sound he was robbed of his ability to think rationally.

"I want to stop suffering—was probably what he'd thought. Because his life, so filled with regrets, truly was a living hell."

"Uh... Uhhh..."

"And so he had been released. From his dream, that is."

"Uhhh..."

As Jarre blocked his ears, he hadn't noticed that the man reflected in the back mirror was not even moving his mouth anymore.

The voice he heard was a coarse voice quite unlike that of the man.

"He was finally able to escape from his pitiful, miserable life..."

Until they reached the hotel, the loud metallic sound and the man's murmurs never ceased.

3.00 Inuko Part 4

The sky was blue.

The pleasantly warm weather indicated the end of winter.

Lying sprawled on top of the hard asphalt, Inuko basked in the sunlight as if savoring every second of it. The raincoat hanging from the hockey stick inserted into the drain hole raised a clattering sound as it blew by the wind.

"I refuse."

With an onigiri bought at a convenience store in her left hand and a cellphone in her right hand, Inuko raised a nonchalant voice. Since she was moving her mouth while eating, the person on other side of the phone was apparently unable to hear her replies well.

"Like I said, I refuse. Telling me to come back to Central Headquarters immediately is no joke. I still have things to do here. Since I've already handed the report to the branch here, it should be quickly passed along to the Headquarters."

"The situation is urgent. The branch had been attacked by *Shinpu*, and other than the Branch Director there are also plenty of members who are still unconscious—this sort of thing had never happened before. It is natural for the Headquarters to receive the detailed report instead of the branch that had lost most of its functions."

The one on the other side of the phone spoke in a mild tone. Even through the phone Inuko felt like she could see that chaining smile that stripped the will of anyone in front of it.

Shinpu had not been recorded by the surveillance cameras installed in the assaulted branch. Most of the picture was covered by large amounts of miasma. Meaning that once again it had been only Inuko to confirm *Shinpu*'s existence.

"That's quite odd of you to say, Vice-Director Miguruma-dono."

Inuko answered, completely calm. Having finished eating her onigiri, she now fumbled around inside a plastic bag for a new sandwich.

Shinpu had attacked the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau— Ordinarily it should have been a major incident that would shake the branches in the entire country.

However, Central Headquarters decided putting everything on hold until after hearing about it directly from Inuko. There was probably also the reason of avoiding confusion, but it just meant that it was that much unbelievably shocking.

"During Valentine's Day... The proposal of Acting Branch Director Goroumaru to change the chain of command had been accepted and should have come into effect. The authority of the Central Headquarters, until now of the highest priority, was to become second to the local branch. And in the case their Branch Director is absent then the authority to issue commands should go to the Acting Director or to the Assistant. This means that they have yet to lose their functions as a branch."

"The Assistant had said she would respect the opinion of Central Headquarters. So perhaps I should head over there to receive your report?"

This is no joke—

Inuko muttered in her heart. Right now that branch had been blockaded by a unit sent from Central Headquarters under the pretext of a high state of alert. If she went there she would obviously be taken into custody.

The Central Headquarters' forcible way of doing things wasn't anything new, but this time it was especially abnormal. Inuko knew that they were going to thoroughly interrogate anyone they thought had come in contact with *Shinpu*.

As she grew silent, the Vice Director of Central Headquarters, Miguruma Yaeko, spoke in a gentle voice.

"*Asagi*. You are my important and beloved subordinate. I am worried for you after coming in contact with *Shinpu*. You might be under the influence of his mental pollution, so we should conduct a thorough checkup."

"It wasn't contact. I annihilated him. How's that strange corpse's investigation going along?"

"The autopsy results seem to indicate there is no other conclusion except that it was simply a decomposed body. You are the only one to insist that *Shinpu* had inhabited it and that you had annihilated it. There were no other witnesses, right?"

Being asked this, Inuko fell silent.

She had reported about the presence of *Shinpu* and her annihilation of him—nothing more. She hadn't revealed that during this she had spoken with *Shinpu* and heard disquieting information about the Central Headquarters. She was also yet to report about her "discovery" known as Shiohara Shachito.

"However, I do believe the testimony of my beloved subordinate. *Because* I believe you I find it to be essential that you inform me of this directly."

"I will send you the written report again. I'm thinking about staying in this city for a while to make sure *Shinpu* doesn't appear again."

"How strange. Were you not supposed to have annihilated *Shinpu*? Is there still any need to stay alert regarding him?"

Being asked this by a kind tone, Inuko frowned.

Oops—

Yaeko's chaining smile grabbed Inuko's heart through the phone call.

"That's... I just have a bad feeling. I'm just not confident that—"

"There was nothing of the sort in your report."

"So I'm saying that I'll send it again."

"Please leave caution to the members sent there. If the need arises we will dispatch further reinforcements from Central Headquarters. This is an order, *Asagi*, got it?"

Inuko's hand carrying the sandwich to her mouth stopped.

The tranquil scenery of lunch was wrapped in tension.

She thought desperately of an excuse to let her settle this without being

called back to Central Headquarters. She sorted out information that would be good to expose and things that she must never say.

"...There's actually another thing that caught my interest."

"Please tell me about it."

"I've discovered an excellent Mushitsuki and am currently monitoring him. As I see it, he is blessed with unparalleled talent as a combatant. At present I'm testing—"

"About what Rank you expect him to be?"

"Rank 3 or 2... no, if I focus on my current training program, I think that it's not impossible for him to be even above that."

She said in a subdued voice.

This was a kind of gamble.

Yaeko seemed to be thinking for a while.

"Understood, *Asagi*. I permit you to carry out your mission on site."

Inuko sank into silence only for a second, then responded in acknowledgement.

"The time limit will be... you know, right? Just so you will not make any foolish moves that shorten your own life."

Inuko felt around for the lollipops in her pocket over the raincoat.

These were order-made candies that only the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau knew how to make. Although she had been given the freedom to journey by herself, her constant need for these lollipops was the same as having a collar.

All of the candies supposed to have been supplied to her at the local branch were smashed to pieces during *Shinpu's* attack.

Yaeko would probably not hand her any candies until she returned to Central Headquarters. Meaning that if she didn't come back until her reserve lollipops ran out, Inuko would— "..."

She bit her lips.

She could no longer turn back—

"I would like to ask you another thing."

Miguruma Yaeko's voice stayed so kind that it gave her the chills.

"Do you really have no idea as to why *Shinpu* would attack the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau?"

—Thou should consider it a warning... as well as revenge.

The words *Shinpu* had left behind floated to her mind.

"I have no clue. Just trying to annihilate him took everything I had."

She replied, making her voice sound as carefree as she could.

Whether or not she noticed the turbulence in Inuko's heart, there was not even the slightest of changes to Yaeko's reply.

"I see, understood. —I look forward to the birth of an excellent combatant. Do your best to meet the expectations of my love, *Asagi*."

Leaving these words behind, Yaeko hanged up.

"If I don't live up to them I'll be killed... You should just say this clearly, Vice Director-dono."

Dropping the cellphone, Inuko made a deep sigh. Now that she finished her conversation with that woman with the chaining smile, she could finally feel the taste of the sandwich she had been eating expand in her mouth.

"She seems to be convinced I've obtained some kind of information from *Shinpu*, huh. ...So I finally seem to be in danger."

Finishing her meal, Inuko put a lollipop inside her mouth.

The Central Headquarters began being cautious of Inuko.

As I thought they're hiding something big about Shinpu— They were probably trying to recall Inuko back because of the possibility she had found out the secret. Both their blockade of the local branch as well as sealing up the flow of information seemed to be for that purpose. She didn't know what methods they would use to make her speak up once she came back.

Although she had barely avoided the summons, she ended up carrying a huge bomb.

Since she had revealed the existence of that raw ore, if Inuko failed in raising the strongest warrior—there was no doubt she would receive a suitable punishment.

"Quite the difficult situation. I'm practically completely cornered."

If they knew she had grasped the secret, she would probably be erased.

And it was the same if she failed raising a warrior.

On the other hand, even if she ran away, as long as Inuko had no candies her fate was as clear as day.

However—she didn't give in to despair just yet.

"There's something I simply have to do, no matter how."

Inuko had been sleeping on top of Horanto High School's roof.

By looking down she could see the school cafeteria. Inside this building, isolated and separate from the campus, the figures of a boy and a girl eating together could be seen.

They were Shiohara Shachito and Masaki Rio.

Due to the wounds Shachito had received in his fight against *Shinpu* a few days ago, his face and arms were covered by compresses. Meanwhile Rio was desperately trying to shake off Shachito's hands.

—Ah, I feel so healed. You're even giving your best efforts to eat your udon, Rio-chan, huh?

—Please stop trying to pat my head! I can't eat like this!

Inuko had no intention of eavesdropping, but since she had acquired the skill to read lips during her training she understood their conversation.

"...I had no other way but telling them about you."

While watching this peaceful scene, Inuko squinted.

She had broken her promise with Shachito.

As long as he became strong during her stay in Holland city, she wouldn't report him to the SEPB. That was her promise, yet she couldn't think of any other excuse for her to stay there.

By her fight with *Shinpu* Inuko became convinced.

Her lifespan as a warrior was already running out. If she lost her ability to fight she would also lose her *raison d'être*. The weakness gnawing into her mind and body would eventually rob her of her very life.

On the other hand, she could feel the birth of a new warrior.

"Shachito. You'll become strong. I will make you strong."

Shiohara Shachito.

Inuko had miscalculated his growth to a surprising extent.

Shachito's talent surpassed her expectations. She hadn't imagined he could grow so much in so short of a time.

And most importantly, he had what Inuko lacked—he was favored by battle. Judging from his personality, he was obviously trying to escape from fighting. And yet as he still ended up coming in contact with *Shinpu* and fighting him seriously, it was obvious.

Inuko had always been left behind for important battles.

But Shachito was different. No matter how much he wanted to escape from fighting, the battlefield desired him.

He possessed the only thing that Inuko, master of all possible battle techniques, lacked— How long it had been ever since she felt envy toward anyone related to battle?

"This is my final mission. I'll definitely raise you to be the strongest there is."

Even Shachito, who had been perplexed at first, was slowly growing past his desire to run away from battle.

He currently seemed to be unable to control his "nearly broken" self that appeared during battle. But even that could be said to be going according to Inuko's plan.

Since his true nature rose to the surface once, it would become increasingly easier for Shachito to make the switch inside him.

The more a warrior fought the more he became battle-drunk.

It was an important period of time.

Inuko had to make him indulge in battles by her own hands.

"..."

Shachito was making a friendly chat with his usual, carefree smile. He was enjoying his peaceful daily life from the bottom of his heart. For him, who was destined to become a warrior, it was an unneeded emotion.

Inuko had only two tests remaining for him.

In order to lead him to success in them, these peaceful days were unneeded.

Inuko's line of sight focused on the girl in front of Shachito's eyes.

Masaki Rio.

She had apparently been eating lunch with Shachito for the past few days. To Inuko it seemed like their relationship was gradually deepening.

"...That girl's in the way."

Shishidou Inuko's "aptitude exam".

The target was Shiohara Shachito.

—Start.

3.01 The Others

After school, Shiohara Shachito waited for Rio to change her shoes, pulling his motorbike along with him.

"Let's go together until your bus stop, Rio-chan."

His whole face covered by wet compresses, Shachito wore a carefree smile.

Her classmates near them all turned gazes of curiosity towards the two. Rio blushed, exiting the shoe racks in quick steps. Today her lessons were delayed, so her time to return home was the same as other students.

"D-don't come all the way here to meet me! You should've just waited at the parking area..."

"Hmm? Why?"

While pulling his motorbike, Shachito tilted his head as if he was not thinking of anything.

"T-that's, umm... There's recently been all sorts of rumors..."

"Rumors? Of what kind?"

Walking side by side, Shachito made a puzzled face. Rio was at a loss for words, averting her eyes.

It had already been Rio's loss from the moment she had accepted his invitation for lunch the other day. Starting that day he came to Rio's class to meet her and she started eating lunch in the cafeteria with him.

No matter whether he acted overly familiar toward anyone in the first place or if it was like that just with Rio, she became unable to turn down Shachito's invitations that seemed to be serious.

It didn't mean she hated his attitude.

She was simply different from Shachito who was so used to speaking with members of the opposite sex to the extent there were rumors of him being a "playboy".

Since until now Rio devoted herself for acting practice, even just having a boy call out to her was a major event. And since it was even an upperclassman she just couldn't help but feel embarrassed.

"Hmm, I don't really get it, are you telling me to stop because I'm causing you trouble or I'm annoying or something? C'mon, tell me everything you think!"

Shachito displayed a cheerful smile—or, if she had to express it frankly, a silly smile.

Not good. What Rio wanted to convey wasn't being understood at all. She puffed her cheeks.

"It's not like you're particularly causing trouble for me..."

"So, if it's no problem, let's just keep going! Okay?"

"...Okay."

Seeing Shachito vigorously raise his index finger, she gave up on retorting. She would be happy if he'd just asked her out a bit more modestly.

But even if she conveyed this to him, it no longer had any meaning.

Rio made a single resolution.

She also couldn't allow herself to be caught up by Shachito's pace today.

"Do you have something today?"

When they exited the school gate, Shachito suddenly inquired.

Rio raised her face with a start. She apparently made a brooding face without realizing.

"Huh?"

"It feels like you've been growing quieter every day. You usually had this sort of desperation like a hamster running on a wheel that made me feel healed every time I saw you..."

"Hamster?! H-have you really been looking at me like this, Shachito-senpai...?"

As he unhesitatingly nodded with a "yeah", Rio received a small shock. But she couldn't allow herself to be manipulated, so she took a deep breath and was somehow able to remain calm.

"I have an audition today!"

As Rio clenched her fist, full of fighting spirits, Shachito looked at her, puzzled.

"Audition?"

"Yes. There's a missing actor for a play about to be performed in Oranje Land soon... I'm going to the final audition for that."

She unconsciously tightened the hold on her bag.

Yes, Rio's talent was about to be tested during tonight's final audition. She planned on bringing out everything she'd done so far. She couldn't fail.

"A play in Oranje Land... Is that the thing they've been talking about on TV lately? I don't really know about it but that thing done by a famous company. Are you going to appear there, Rio-chan?"

"No, as I said... since it's the final audition now, I'm not necessarily going to..."

Her shoulders suddenly slumped. It was obvious, but Shachito had no idea about how hard it was to pass the audition.

"Where are they doing it? Somewhere in the city?"

"In a building in front of the station. The one recently remodeled."

"I see. ...You're amazing, Rio-chan."

No matter if he knew how she felt or not, Shachito seemed strangely impressed. The wet compresses on his face looked painful, but he himself didn't seem to mind it. She heard that he'd fallen from his motorbike again.

"Alright!"

For some reason Shachito also raised a fired-up voice.

"Do your best, Rio-chan! I can't do anything for you, but I'll at least cheer you

on."

Seeing his carefree grin, Rio's cheeks reddened.

So far Rio had done her best all by herself. She thought of trying to make her dream come true without relying on anyone but her own powers, but now that she was encouraged by someone she could feel a different sort of power welling up inside her.

"Yes! I will do my best!"

She made a pose as if acting on the stage.

The tension she had before the final audition slightly dissipated. She regretted thinking of Shachito as someone unnecessary.

Shachito-senpai is cheering on me. I have to do my best— Since she had worried too much all by herself, she was glad to have someone else as her ally.

"I know! If you pass I'll grant you one wish. I can take you to some place you'd like or treat you to something good. You can even ask for something naughty."

"..."

"Wah, so cold! You're so cold, Rio-chan! A look like that will triple the amount of damage from that failed joke!"

Seeing Shachito playing the fool, she burst into laughter without thinking. But once she laughed honestly she felt her shoulders slumping again.

If she passed then she would immediately begin concentrated practice. If that happened she would become much busier than before and so would have even less time to meet up with Shachito. But as thanks for cheering her on, if it's only for a little while she would make up some time to go hang out with him, she thought.

"Senpai—"

Only her being cheered felt bad, so she calmly raised a question.

"You've said that you have no dream, but is that true? Like something you'd like to do or something you're aiming for."

She simply thought it strange.

If Rio didn't have the dream of becoming an actress she would have nothing. Even if she gave up that dream and started playing around every day like Shachito, she didn't have the confidence she would be as lively as him.

Shachito smiled lightly. He shook his hand.

"Nope. I have no dreams or hopes."

"Haa..."

Rio tilted her head. She couldn't tell whether he was serious or joking.

"Haven't you said you're busy lately? It seems like you're having a tough time. You are also falling off your motorcycle too much."

"Oh? Are you worried for me, Rio-chan? That feels fresh."

As he poked her cheeks, Rio curled her lips.

But now that Shachito said this she recalled.

Now that she thought of it, this might have been the first time she'd asked about him. Since it was always Shachito who spoke to her she realized that she knew nothing about him.

I was only thinking about myself—

Seeing Rio about to fill with self-hatred, he smiled.

"To be honest, I have some troubles right now... but well, saying it clearly, it's completely fine? I'll clean it all up in a jiffy and go back to school like usual. Yeah, once I do it I'll have to compensate everyone for neglecting them."

He spoke in a cheerful tone typical of him. However, for some reason he seemed stronger than usual to Rio. Perhaps he had been doing some sort of training, as his body seemed burlier than it was when Rio had first met him.

"Oh right. Once it becomes spring maybe I'll get a license for a medium vehicle. I'll work part time and buy a real motorcycle... Then I'll be able to take you for a ride, Rio-chan! Wow, I'm amazing. This's a super good idea!"

Shachito got excited all on his own.

He seemed very happy just finding a small goal like that.

Looking at the happy-seeming Shachito, Rio hesitated if she should talk about her resolution. She knew she should speak about it, but she wasn't quite able to get it out of her mouth.

If she were to pass the audition, Rio would have to—

"I-I'm..."

She opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated.

Shachito erased his smile. Still dragging his motorbike, he gazed straight ahead with an indescribable, complex expression. Rio fixed her gaze on his profile without meaning to.

"Thinking about it, I wonder why I'm so fascinated by you, Rio-chan."

"...Eh?"

She ended up letting out a silly-sounding voice. As Shachito's line of sight moved toward her, she blushed without thinking.

"They say people end up liking those who possess what they don't have, right? It's probably the same here."

"..."



"I have no dream. But you do, Rio-chan. So it's like this. —I feel like I finally got it."

While he grinned at her, Rio's expression stiffened.

What did he mean by that?

She couldn't really understand the meaning of Shachito's words. —No, she had the feeling she did get it, but was it really so?

Was this possibly a confession—

And if so, was it fine saying it so lightly?

"Bhah! What the heck, Rio-chan! You're making such a weird face!"

As Rio opened her mouth thinking that she had to say something, Shachito pointed at her and laughed.

"Wha—"

Rio blushed and tried to protest, but Shachito pointed ahead with his head.

"We're here."

"What? Huh?"

"The bus stop."

Being told this, she finally noticed the bus schedule in front of her eyes.

Rio and Shachito stopped in place at the same time.

As Rio stayed silent while holding her bag, Shachito parked his motorbike and got closer. He apparently intended on waiting for the bus with her.

—No, perhaps he was waiting for Rio's response?

Since the conversation had such a light flow she had already lost her chance to ask back. She couldn't judge whether or not it had been a confession.

A silence fell between the two. Shachito was humming while looking at the road, but Rio focused everything on suppressing her palpitations.

"U-umm! Shachito-senpai, about a second ago—"

It happened just as she decided to ask.

"...!"

A cracked metallic sound shook her eardrums.

It was the sound she had heard a few times before, audible only for her. Every time she heard it Rio felt a horrible discomfort welling in her chest. This creepy sensation soaked in, steadily encroaching her as if it were a filthy mud permeating the depths of her body.

"Hmm?"

Shachito asked back, yet she couldn't reply.

She heard the conversation of two students passing behind her.

"—She's being completely deceived, huh."

She turned around in shock.

The students, wearing a sinister smile, glanced at Rio as if they found it amusing.

She probably heard them wrong—just as Rio thought so, a woman that seemed to be an office lady passed next to her while talking on her phone.

She could see something black moving from the students over to the woman.

"—She's taking a playboy seriously and even feels happy about it... so stupid."

The woman's smile transformed. Something like black mist stuck to her as she wore a sinister smile.

"Rio-chan?"

Shachito was apparently unable to see the black object. Not only that, he apparently couldn't hear the voices of the people passing nearby either.

As Rio gulped, a youth riding a bicycle passed in front of her.

Something resembling a cloth born from the coagulating mist passed from the woman to the bicycle-riding youth.

"—If you don't pass you'll lose your reason for meeting him."

The youth mumbled in the instant they crossed each other. His sneer was directed at none other than Rio.

Her shoulders trembled.

Rio could feel, slowly but steadily—something foul taking hold of her heart.

Foul emotions were encroaching the elated Rio.

I-I'm—

She started feeling angry without any warning. How could she let her heart be swayed by something foolish like love just before a huge audition?

Unless she passed, never mind meeting Shachito, it would make everything meaningless.

It would deny all of her desperate efforts, and yet she still— "*You're not going to pass anyway.*"

The voice echoing from a line of elementary school students walking nearby became the trigger. Immediately after she heard a hoarse voice which was completely unchildlike, Rio started emitting sweat from her entire body.

Her limbs shook and she couldn't even let out any voice.

"Ah... Ah..."

She was scared.

She was scared of having everything she'd done so far tested by an exam that took less than an hour.

She had no confidence. Ever since the first examination, Rio hadn't even a slight confidence.

She felt only pressure.

The tension, pressing ever closer, assaulted her with the urge to escape.

—Giving in to her oppressive urges, Rio was on the verge of panic.

"I feel... something weird."

Shachito, his hand stuck in his pocket while leaning on the motorbike, muttered.

The next instant, an orange light passed in front of Rio's sight.

The bad presence that loomed over the area until now caused a sound and

withdrew. The metallic sound reverberating in her ears vanished.

"If you feel anything unusual first of all expand your domain—was that it? I unconsciously acted just as I was taught but... oh well. Nobody saw it, probably."

Scratching his head, Shachito muttered to himself absentmindedly.

"But what was that just now? I've never felt anything like that before..."

Shachito made an expression Rio had never seen before.

"Hihah."

It was only for a split second—but Shachito showed a bizarre smile. His eyes became sharper and he gazed at his surroundings like a famished beast looking for its prey.

Calling it twisted would be somewhat wrong. It was more dangerous, fragile, fleeting— —He was breaking down.

Thus Rio felt.

The creepy presence drifting around was gone, but now she felt fear from Shachito. Trying to suppress her body trembling, she hugged herself with both hands.

"Ugh, so she came to see me off before you."

By the time Rio returned her gaze to the front of the road, the previous Shachito had returned.

Following his gaze, she could see a small red vehicle heading towards them. The Vespa, raising light engine sounds, got on top of the walkway and parked.

Stylishly getting off the Vespa was the raincoat-wearing girl that had been with Shachito a few days ago. With her goggles lowered to her neck, she looked at the opposite side road.

"Seems like the bus has come. You're boarding that, right?"

Turning back after being told this, Rio could see that her scheduled bus has finally come.

"Do be careful. *There seem to be plenty of accidents lately.*"

Staring directly into Rio's eyes, Inuko smiled.

For some reason she got the chills.

The gaze of the raincoat girl in front of her eyes made her feel really bad. It felt like a beast that caught sight of its prey; a sense of intimidation as though she would never be able to run away from her.

Rio immediately became unable to calm down.

The presence earlier, Shachito's change, the mysterious girl in front of her... there were too many unknown fears for Rio there.

"Shachito, I've felt your power's wave. Don't use it thoughtlessly."

"No, I just felt something weird so I ended up doing it."

"Something weird? Thinking of it, I have felt an abnormal power wave for a second."

"Wave?"

As Rio waited for the arrival of the bus, the two people behind her tilted their heads at one another.

"Rio-chan."

Being called, she raised her head. Shachito smiled at her.

"You were about to say something just now, right? What was it?"

It was the usual, carefree Shachito.

Yet right now Rio couldn't even look him in the face.

Only fear was swirling inside her. And the scariest of all was the final audition she was heading to right now.

She hadn't the leisure to think of anything unnecessary.

"Do your best in the audition, Rio-chan!"

As Rio was about to board the oncoming bus, Shachito cheered her.

She glanced at him, but soon averted her gaze.

"...I will do my best even if you don't tell me to."

Rio got on the bus, muttering in a voice no-one would hear.

As she sat down, a black object that appeared from nowhere suddenly fell on her collar.

It was—a small, black, filthy piece of cloth.

3.02 Shachito Part 4

Next to the bus stop was a parking area. Inuko jumped on top of the fences made of a metal net. Position-wise she was exactly above Shachito's head.

"..."

Shachito silently saw the bus leave.

His vision shook. Inuko used her hockey stick to poke his head. The raincoat girl wore a skirt today as well.

"What's wrong, Shachito? You're making a serious face unlike you. Oh, and if you look up I'll kill you. Trying to see my panties... what a horny boy you are."

"—I wonder what my dream used to be?"

As he hanged out with Rio more and more, he started thinking about such things.

He spent his days without any goal or aspiration, and even after meeting Inuko he started going through battle training and the like only because she threatened him. He received guidance for how to battle without resisting, without even trying to run away; he simply went with the flow.

Shachito felt like he was missing something tremendously important right now.

Seeing Rio, he became extremely curious what that was. He had fun being with her, but the more he did the more he felt uncomfortable.

Now he started having doubts about his purpose in meeting up with Rio.

Rather than saying he met up with her because he wanted to be with her, he felt like he did so just to ascertain the discomfort inside him.

"I've been thinking about this more and more when I meet with Rio-chan. It's like I'm forgetting something huge... Is there any connection to my inability to

recall my dream?"

Would Shachito eventually return to his previous lifestyle or would he become a warrior like Inuko said—well, he still didn't really understand what being a warrior entailed, but anyhow he was at a crossroads.

What would Shachito do, then?

It was obvious.

Without thinking of anything in particular, he would surrender himself to the flow and let it decide.

Shachito had neither the intention to oppose fate nor any purpose in doing so.

—He felt as if he couldn't do it.

A small emotion was born inside him, surprising even himself. Although he lived enjoyably and without thinking of anything too deeply so far, mysteriously—he started feeling something akin to guilt.

And those feelings of guilt for some reason grew bigger the more he met with Rio.

Oh well—

Until now this would be the stage where he would say this and stop thinking.

But now there was a part of him that kept thinking beyond that.

"I've said this before right? You don't need to recall—"

"That *Shinpu* guy made me a Mushitsuki, right?"

Shachito said, interrupting Inuko's words.

"He took 'pain' away from me."

He could remember little by little.

He was supposed to have possessed some dream ever since becoming a Mushitsuki. Even if he recalled the instant he had harbored these strong emotions, he was unable to recall what exactly he'd wished for.

In a white room, wrapped in a white blanket, Shachito harbored a certain

dream.

There was no shred of a doubt it was reality.

"Is it influence from Masaki Rio? That you almost remember."

"Is that so?"

He inquired with a serious face. He could hear Inuko sigh.

"I thought so. But I don't really understand it now. Since it's *Shinpu* he should be the same. Yet the thing we've met called itself a fragment, and referred to the different one with the appearance of an old man as the 'first fragment'."

"That man's corpse... Was he *Shinpu*? We defeated him right?"

"His identity has already been determined. He was a civilian from Akamaki City. According to the testimony of his acquaintances, his dream since childhood was destroyed and he became depressed. Whether he took his own life or died in some other manner, there's no doubt that he'd died during the period he went missing. Actually at the time I wasn't actually sure whether I annihilated him or not."

"Hmm..."

Shachito made a flat response to indicate he was listening. If *Shinpu* appeared again, he would simply defeat him again. —As long as he was with Inuko, there existed no opponent that could defeat them. He honestly thought so.

Inuko was sitting on the fence while Shachito stood with both hands stuck in his pocket below her.

They were two Mushitsuki of a similar age.

They were a pair of teacher and student connected to battle.

The wind of Holland City blew between them. This gale, carrying the scent of saltwater, made Inuko's raincoat flutter. The cars in front of her eyes honked.

"Maybe he's still in this city. Will he target a person with a dream again?"

"You're thinking about Masaki Rio again, right? You're not in the position to be busy with romance right now, you know?"

"That's not it. But it's possible, right?"

"I can't say anything about *Shinpu*. But regarding Masaki Rio, I can say that she won't become a Mushitsuki. You can relax."

Shachito furrowed his brows.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Once you become like me, you're able to know which people could become Mushitsuki. Do worship me. —As far as I can see, Masaki Rio will not become a prey for the Original Three."

Inuko clearly declared.

"And that is because... *she's already about to give up her dream.*"

Shachito raised his face at the girl's unexpected words.

"Hah? No way, right? Rio-chan is—"

Inuko used her stick to poke his nose.

"I told you not to look up. But there is a reason. What the Original Three like is the moment when people harbor their dreams the strongest. You said she was an aspiring actress, right? Just now she looked to me like she was tired of her dream."

"But that's just a shot in dark right? I don't think it's true."

While expressing his dissatisfaction, Shachito rubbed his nose— "...!"

—*Thump*, his heart throbbed.

He was suddenly agitated by his own actions.

Right now—what had he done?

He had unconsciously *rubbed his nose*.

It was already gone, but *hadn't his nose felt some pain?*

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"N-no... it's nothing."

It might've just been his imagination. Shachito feigned calmness.

"What's your dream, Inuko? Is it something like finding the legendary

raincoat?"

He inquired Inuko to hide his agitation.

"Yeah, I went on a journey to find the golden raincoat... as if, what the hell? You seem to be under the mistaken impression that I'm some raincoat freak or something."

"Oh, am I wrong?"

"Obviously, you moron. ...My dream isn't something I should tell people. It's a hopelessly worthless childish dream. Even the legendary raincoat would be cuter."

He felt as if a slight disgust had been mixed with Inuko's voice. Becoming curious on what expression she was making, he looked up at her. She stepped on his face with her boots.

He felt no pain this time. He spat out the dirt entering his mouth to the ground.

"Don't speak too badly of your dream."

"Even in this beautiful world there are thorns. Just like hope, there's also despair. Everything's balanced. If you're unable to grasp the full picture, you'll never be able to become the strongest warrior."

"...That again?"

Shachito's sigh became the sign to finish the conversation. Inuko jumped down from the fence with agile movements.

"Don't escape from the fight in front of your eyes, Shachito. When people who can only live as warriors are left alone in the battlefield it's all over for them. Nothing remains afterwards."

She poked the tip of her nose with her stick. Shachito averted his face dejectedly.

"Whether I'm a warrior or combatant or whatever, I'll never really get what that means. But I just—"

"Just what?"

"I just thought that... it would be nice if my dream was as beautiful as Rio-chan's."

Inuko sank into silence. Just as he thought that she was gazing at him for a while, she rotated her stick and put it back on her back.

"Inuko?"

"My lifespan as a warrior was short, but a lot happened. Quite a lot... And during that I've learned a magic spell. I'll teach it to you, so listen carefully."

Spinning around to turn her back, she stepped toward her parking Vespa.

"Fight!"

Without caring they were in public, Inuko's loud voice reverberated around.

"Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!"

It was a voice full of joy. The warrior's battlecry, indicating fighting to be supreme bliss, was repeated countless times.

Yet he could also hear some suffering mixed in. There were also the grief of wounding and being wounded, as well as the gladness of victory and the pitifulness of loss.

Shishidou Inuko's battle-filled life was put into this single word.

Turning around to the shocked Shachito, Inuko got on her Vespa.

"Even if you're having fun, even if you're sad, even if you're pained, even if you're suffering, even if you're hesitating... it doesn't matter at all. You can solve everything with battle. If you don't know what you need to do, then fight. If you can fight, then fight. Even if you can't fight, then fight. If you want to fight, then win. We can win against anything. Even if we lose, we can win the next time."

Inuko sent a gaze filled with a resolute will at Shachito. She smiled and wore her helmet.

"If you still can't take even the first step, I will remove your shackles."

Shachito furrowed his brows, unable to understand the meaning of her words, but as he heard the Vespa's engine revving up he hurriedly rushed after

her.

"H-hey! What about my training today! Is it a day off?"

"The training's already started."

Inuko asserted while putting on her goggles. She rode ahead, leaving Shachito behind.

"...?"

Shachito stood there for a while but was unable to understand her words.

—Not at the time.

3.03 Shachito Part 5

Ever since he came back home, Shachito still felt not fully satisfied.

Since he'd thought that he was going to train again today for sure he already cancelled all of his other plans with friends. It would be difficult to join up with them at this stage.

According to what Inuko said, his training had apparently already started.

Did that mean even resting was part of his training? Thinking of it, the harsh training day after day and the battle with *Shinpu* caused him to accumulate quite the fatigue.

"Well, if she tells me to rest then I'll happily do it. Lucky lucky."

Throwing his jacket on top of his bed, he sat on it.

He opened his cellphone and looked at the screen.

He had received 7 emails.

Perhaps because he lately had fewer chances to hang out with friends, the amount of emails also lessened.

This didn't mean he severed relations with them, though. If Shachito returned to his previous lifestyle, he would be able to immediately restore all of his relationships.

—You've said that you have no dream, but is that true?

As he stayed still, Rio floated to his mind.

He had none.

Shachito couldn't recall his dream. He couldn't even say for sure that it wasn't a big deal.

Since that girl had the dream to become an actress, she probably had to face

many obstacles. When she had been asked this by him, Rio's expression grew serious.

Shachito had said that he wanted to see Rio because she possessed what he lacked. Thinking about it, it wouldn't be weird for his words from that time to sound like a love confession.

If it was an unintentional confession, did this mean he liked Rio?

"That's somewhat wrong, though."

He certainly possessed a favorable opinion on Rio. But if he were asked whether they were feelings of love, he felt like he couldn't affirm or deny it.

While he didn't know the truth about his feelings, his discomfort only kept growing.

He had the strange hunch that he was forgetting something important.

Even so he went to see Rio and naturally ended up supporting her.

It felt horrible unstable.

"I wonder if Rio-chan's doing her audition already."

Yet his feelings of wanting to cheer on Rio were no lie.

She's working hard even now, right?

Thinking this, he next became curious about himself. Since he had become a Mushitsuki, was there a time when even someone like him had a dream that made him sparkle just like Rio?

Several photographs were attached with pins to a board hanging from the wall. All of them were of a carefree Shachito smiling along with his friends.

Getting off the bed, he opened his closet. Being covered in dust as he fumbled inside, he soon found several albums. All the pictures that couldn't be hung on the board were thrown inside here.

"I should look at my past happy life every once in a while."

Sitting cross-legged, he leafed through the album.

The photos were ordered starting from the latest which were the first year of

high school and following to when he was in middle school.

"Wow, I might've been even more of an airhead than I am now."

Even in his photos from middle school he was surrounded by smiling friends just like in the present. With the only difference between them being the background, the photos were all overflowing with fun.

"Now that I'm looking at it that guy looks so stupid. It's me though. This one's amazing, I've done well to capture it. Oh, was it a digital camera? If this one is found won't I be arrested?"

It was clear that even back then he wasn't any different from now that he was on his second year of high school; he only sought after pleasure without thinking of anything.

"...I wasn't self-conscious about it, but was I really a playboy? I mean, these pictures with girls are clearly... it's making me a bit sad."

He leafed through the album's pages with a wry smile.

"I was so stupid back then, I used to do all these—"

Putting a hand on his forehead and smiling, Shachito's expression suddenly froze.

"...Back then?"

A bizarre sense of discomfort suddenly rose inside him.

With his smile still frozen, Shachito's hand moved on its own.

It flipped the album backwards.

With time passing, the pictures of Shachito as a high school student appeared again.

"But right now..."

What changed was only about the scenery and Shachito's height.

For some reason—

He had a horrible premonition—

"It doesn't look like... anything's changed, though..."

He used a hand to touch his face that was frozen with a smile.

He touched his cheeks.

He recalled that time just after Valentine's Day.

Shachito had been called out by his classmate and was then slapped. He wanted to be tolerant and forgive her harsh misunderstanding. "I want to end it already", she said, and Shachito just thought that she watched too many dramas.

But actually—had Shachito really done nothing to her?

She was someone who called out to him despite the fact he was unable to remember her name.

At the time he had been slapped, which of them was tolerant and forgave the other?

When he'd met the girl the following day, wasn't she looking at Shachito with eyes filled with misery—with contempt?

"...Hmm?"

Something was strange.

It wasn't that he couldn't remember or that he forgot because it was too long ago.

He felt as if everything he'd done, everything he was doing, was all rearranged to his convenience.

Something was twisted.

"—Oh well, it doesn't matter."

He felt as if he mustn't think any deeper than that. The part of him that tried to stop thinking suppressed the part that tried thinking.

"Why was I looking in the album again? Oh, right. I wanted to see if I've ever been sparkling with a dream."

His pupils reflected on the album's film were cloudy like those of a doll.

He mechanically leafed through the album.

As long as he used none of his powers he could live while hiding he was a Mushitsuki—he traced back the enjoyable days that passed as he thought that.

"...Oh?"

Light returned to Shachito's eyes.

Going back to a certain period, the photos decorating the album had a completely different atmosphere.

It appeared to be around the lower grades of middle school.

It wasn't the boundlessly cheerful Shachito, but a Shachito in normal commemorative photos. He was pictured with smiles, but there was also a part of him that was anxious having a camera directed at him.

They were somewhat "normal" photographs.

But that conversely caused them to stand out inside his album.

"Thinking about it, I don't think I've had plenty of friends back then... compared to now anyway."

He looked for the boundary between the two sides of the album.

He found it.

He could see a photo of his upper half body on the bed of some hospital, wearing hospital clothes.

He was completely expressionless.

There were no traces of either the plain Shachito or the cheerful Shachito.

"Oh, it was this time. I was run over by a drunk driver and nearly died. As a bonus I was infected by something and it was just horrible, yeah."

He suddenly recalled it as if it was some other people's business.

"Now that I think of it, it was also around the time I became a Mushitsuki..."

For some reason he felt fear.

A sensation squeezed below his stomach as though he was falling down. As he stared at the album, Shachito's pulse quickened.

Suddenly unable to calm down, he closed the album.

"Was there... a time where I... was sparkling with a dream...?"

As he kept thinking his mind became more and more chaotic.

Seeing he became a Mushitsuki he should've had some dream. And yet just as he became a Mushitsuki he turned into the Shachito right now that indulged in his irresponsible lifestyle. Meaning he was the dreamless Shachito right now.

Trying to compose himself, he returned to the bed and grabbed his cellphone. He operated the buttons as if possessed, sending an email to Rio.

*—Are you in the middle of the audition right now? Do your best, Rio-chan!
You're definitely gonna pass it!*

As he sent the cheering mail, he was able to greatly calm down.

Imagining her going through the audition with a desperate face, he burst into laughter.

"Looking at Rio-chan doing her best would probably be amusing. Now if she'd only lower her guard a little bit..."

While laughing carefreely, he looked at the phone.

"...Guard?"

His smile once again froze.

"What am I saying...?"

A shudder welled up from inside his body.

He stubbornly clung to Rio because he wanted to support her beautiful dream. Even if he had a favorable opinion of her, he hadn't the slightest intention to do anything to her, never mind feelings of love.

Or so it should have been.

"What am I trying to do to—"

Don't think of it.

He was warned by none other than himself.

"I-Inuko...!"

He couldn't understand what had happened to him.

As he thought of seeking help, Shishidou Inuko rose to mind. The girl had taught him what being a Mushitsuki was like as well as plenty of other things.

Inuko would be able to help him. It was like that when he'd fought *Shinpu* too.

But the girl's response, supposed to become his salvation, was blunt.

"...What is it?"

Inuko's indifferent voice stabbed Shachito through the receiver.

He could hear cheerful music mixed with the icy voice.

"I'm in the middle of something. Do call me later."

Without waiting for Shachito's reply, she cut off the call.

He felt anger at Inuko's cold act, but he then noticed something completely different.

"That music just now... It's the clock tower near the station—"

Looking up at the clock in his room, it indicated exactly 6:00 PM.

There was no mistake; the clock tower in the station plaza played music at this time every day.

"Why did she take a break from our training and went all the way there?"

As he thought about something other than himself, Shachito's mind went into full throttle.

He recalled what Inuko had said when he met her after school.

—Do be careful. There seem to be plenty of accidents lately.

—If you still can't take even the first step, I will remove your shackles.

Why would Inuko, who until now always kept adding more training for Shachito as long as there was time for it, suddenly take a break from it only for today?

Inuko wanted to raise him into a warrior.

But what were the shackles hindering Shachito from becoming a warrior?

Who was the one who made Shachito go to school in his spare time between

training to meet up with them— "...!"

The chaos in his head was blown off as if it never existed.

Grabbing his jacket, he flew out of his room with his helmet. As soon as he exited the house he mounted the So1o parked in the parking area and started the engine.

—In a building in front of the station. The one recently remodeled.

So said the girl who planned on having her audition today.

"That raincoat freak... I hope you're not thinking of doing anything—"

After wearing his goggles, he flew into the road without even checking it. A car that he nearly crashed into honked at him.

He didn't care about himself at all right now.

If Shachito's guess was correct, something irreversible was about to happen.

Ignoring a red light, he cut through the road while the cars around him honked. Turning through the coastland national highway, he headed for the town center.

Passing the part of town where he had fought Shinpu, he went through the intersection where he had fought a Mushitsuki other than himself for the first time. By the time he went straight ahead through the main street and reached the station it had already become night.

He stopped his motorbike on the road, exiting to the station plaza through the pedestrian bridge.

"Where are you, Inuko...!"

He surveyed the surroundings in front of the clock tower. Including the station itself, it was surrounded by high-rise buildings from all directions.

Rio had said her audition would take place inside the building just remodeled. As far as Shachito knew, there was only one building fitting that description.

It was a tall building that sparkled as it reflected the city's lights.

"...!"

As Shachito looked up the building, his pupils reflected a familiar yellow. He could see it fluttering by the wind even above the highest floor, on the rooftop's water tower.

"Found you—"

With a furious expression, he took swift action.

The next instant, Shachito's body left an orange afterimage behind as it disappeared.

He appeared on the zenith of the clock tower along with a light tapping sound. —Since Shachito's weight became zero, he moved the same as if he was in a zero gravity space. Gaining initial speed that it would not be an exaggeration to say was comparable to teleportation just by kicking the ground, and then instantly restoring his weight, he gained super speed like that of a bullet.

On top of the clock tower, Shachito fixed his goggles. What stood in his way after being released from the chains of gravity was air resistance. He just needed to protect his eyes from the wind pressure.

Using the recoil further, he kicked the clock tower with both legs.

The orange flash pierced through the night sky.

"—Why did you come here?"

Leaping up to the rooftop of the high building in an instant, the yellow raincoat greeted Shachito as he clung to the water tower.

"I'll have to deduct points for using your abilities in front of people when it's not an emergency."

Standing on the fences surrounding the rooftop, Shishidou Inuko made a calm smile.

The wind blowing through the upper air of Holland City was strong.

Both Shachito and Inuko had their coats fiercely fanned to the same direction.

"No you. What are you doing here?"

The wind was so cold he felt as if his face froze over. There was none of

Shachito's usual light smile.

"I just went for a walk. I've had the habit to somehow end up climbing high places ever since I was young."

"Liar."

"But why are you here? Letting your body rest properly every once in a while is also a part of training."

"I came here to support Rio-chan. She's having an audition in this building."

"She hasn't come out yet. It's apparently still going."

"How did you know she was here, Inuko?"

Shachito inquired, not moving a muscle despite the strong wind.

Inuko stood on the fence. Although she only had a single framework under her feet, she also moved no muscle.

"That's—because I followed her, obviously."

Shachito shuddered with a chill.

Inuko's smile changed its nature. The girl in front of him exposed her true character as a cool-headed and brutal warrior.

"...Why have you followed Rio-chan?"

"What, assassinating someone is surprisingly easy. I can just cause the magnetic fields of the bus Masaki Rio will ride on her way home and a car on the opposite lane to amplify and be drawn to each other. And just like that I can cause a collision accident."

"I'm asking you why."

"It's just what you think. —You'll be able to focus more on your training if she's gone, right?"

Seeing Inuko assert this far too easily, Shachito shuddered.

"Just... for that reason, you...!"

The girl smiling calmly on top of the fence couldn't be thought of as human. He felt as if he was facing against a weapon meant only for slaughter.

Although they were this close, the combatant girl felt so far.

Even though there were ten meters between them, she felt near enough to close that distance in an instant.

"You're crazy...!"

"I know."

Hearing Shachito's hoarse voice, Inuko happily raised the corners of her lips. She unsheathed her hockey stick that reflected the moonlight.

"Do become crazy as well."

Inuko jumped down from the fence.

The warrior who knew everything about battle landed on the rooftop floor without a sound.

"It's the perfect opportunity. Seeing her die in front of your eyes will make even you wake up. You'll become stronger by begrudging me."

"Don't... fuck with me!"

It was just so Shachito would become stronger—

He would never allow Rio to be killed for such a petty reason.

Jumping down from the water tower, he let his emotions control him and drew closer to Inuko.

"As if I'd let you do it!"

"—So what're you gonna do about it?"

Inuko's smile made a half-rotation.

It took him a while to understand what had happened. Once he hit the back of his head he realized that his feet had been swept off by the stick, making him tumble down.

He felt no pain as usual, but in exchange he was about to lose his consciousness.

"Are you actually thinking that you can stop me? You sure are conceited for a novice who just learned how to fight."

"...!"

"You need to reflect on your weakness!"

As Inuko scorned him, he attempted nimbly grabbing her feet.

He was easily repelled by the hockey stick and his jaw was kicked up powerfully.

"...!"

Rolling on the ground, Shachito soon stood up. Since he couldn't flinch due to pain, he reached his hands frantically in an attempt to grab Inuko's limbs. Based on arm strength, he should have the advantage over Inuko if he was able to seal her movements.

"You forgot so much even though it's only been a few days since our hand-to-hand fighting lessons. Never mind shifting your body weight, even your movements are all messed up. You have too many wasted movements."

Nimbly dodging Shachito's arms, Inuko waved her hockey stick.

"Guh...!"

The steel-made stick dug into his flank. His breathing ceased and his movements stopped.

"Don't stop moving, you moron. You'll just turn into the enemy's prey."

Just like she said, Inuko went for a consecutive attack.

Since she was not using her ability, the hockey stick should have been much too heavy for her thin arms. However, Inuko skillfully propped up her body, controlling the stick with circular motions as if drawing.

Shachito felt no pain.

Yet when his head was hit his vision would be dyed by white, when his stomach was hit he would lose his breath, and when his legs were hit he would lose his balance.

While looking down at Shachito who squatted on the ground, unable to breathe, Inuko leaned on the fence.

"—How ironic."

With her stick placed on her shoulder, Inuko moved her face to gaze at the windy townscape.

"Even if I look like this I like stuff like musicals and theater. I've even seen the original 'Beast' musical, albeit in video form. Jarre Harissi's performance in particular was magnificent. Based on what I heard about him, isn't he going all around the world and raising youth actors?"

Shachito finally regained his ability to breathe and took heavy breaths.

"Isn't he just like me?"

Inuko's smile seemed lonely. Was she overlapping herself with Jarre?

"We're both scouts on a journey. Is he, just like me, regretting the fact that he can't return to active duty? Is he feeling miserable due to stepping off the stage? Does he also overlap himself with new talent?"

"..."

"Yet the talents that he and I have discovered here in Holland City are the complete opposite. What I found was a frivolous, irresponsible Mushitsuki—and as for him, if Masaki Rio were to pass the audition, he would find a serious and hardworking civilian."

While faltering in her speech, Inuko's expression returned being that of a warrior. Her sharp eyes gazed at Shachito.

"And now, a dreamless Mushitsuki tried to protect a dreaming civilian. — What's up with that? It feels much more like fate than some cheap musical."

Shachito returned Inuko's gaze, his face full of anguish.

"Shachito, have you woken up to the fact you're angry now? This is my first time seeing you angry."

"...!"

Being told of it, he noticed his feelings for the first time.

How long has it been since he felt something like anger?

It wasn't just "pain"; he felt as if he had long forgotten even feelings like these.

"However, that's not anger. Because you lack a dream, you share it with her to feel like you have one. What you're trying to protect isn't her, but the dream you supposedly share with her."

Being asserted this, Shachito was speechless.

During the time he was with Rio he felt something strange. Although it wasn't love, it felt strangely assuring and pleasant. He felt as if Inuko hit right on the mark.

No, it wasn't like that just with Rio.

In the first place Shachito liked cheering his friends who were all aiming and working hard for something.

He finally noticed that Inuko had seen through this reason—such a thought welled up in him.

But acknowledging that would mean—

"This means that Masaki Rio isn't special to you."

Inuko's eyes were staring into the heart hidden in Shachito's chest. He looked at her in shock.

"Until now you just went with the flow and kept living somehow, right? You're like that now, too. You just feel like you're supposed to be angry. You actually don't care about Masaki Rio at all—"

"—Shut up."

Mumbling this, Shachito kicked the ground. He tried tackling Inuko.

Even though he was finally trying to resist, she was easily able to evade. He received a hard blow on his temple by her counterattack.

"Did you say something, blockhead?"

The raincoat girl's ridicule continued.

"You originally possessed no anger. You were a half-hearted person that only smiled foolishly, hated worrying, and lived only to enjoy the moment. Because of that you have no fear even in battle. That is beyond any doubt your weapon. Your one and only greatest weapon that will turn you into the strongest

warrior."

Her relentless blows kept raining down on him even after Shachito stopped resisting.

What Inuko said was perhaps right.

But that was about the previous Shachito.

He was trying to change himself—

None other than Rio made him feel that he couldn't keep going like that. If even that was denied, he couldn't tell what to believe anymore.

"...Who cares about the strongest warrior."

If he couldn't protect Rio here he'd go back to being the previous Shachito. Perhaps he was only protecting Rio to save himself.

However, there was no falsehood in his words saying that he would cheer for her.

Shachito right now, different than the other one, was purely thinking about saving Rio— "Rio-chan has nothing to do with it...!"

He charged at Inuko.

Yet his opponent had no openings. Inuko nimbly evaded, swung her stick upwards from a low position and thrust it into Shachito's solar plexus.

"If she has nothing to do with it, then do cast her away."

He couldn't get even a single solid hit.

Even though he was supposedly superior to her in his physical abilities, the gap caused by her refined martial techniques and experience couldn't be filled.

He couldn't win.

—Is that really so?

"...Hihah."

As a result of the incessant blows Shachito gained a small sensation.

It was "pain".

Even if the Shachito of "this side" couldn't rival her, if he were to yield himself to the Shachito of "that side", perhaps he would even be able to beat Inuko.

Just like when he had fought *Shinpu*—

If he thought of this as a "battle", the smell of the battlefield would change him.

"Hihah!"

An orange glow enveloped Shachito's body. Autumn Darters leapt out of him.

About to counterattack, he raised his face with a broken smile on it.

"If you bring out your Mushi then do resolve yourself, Shachito."

The hockey stick, emitting a strong magnetic field, was brought down on Shachito's nose tip, causing him to widen his eyes. The wave that was strong enough to crush his body into smithereens made even the air shimmer.

"And I'm not talking about resolve for being defeated, but the resolve to beat your opponent no matter what. Our Mushi are neither decorations nor toys. Do know that Mushitsuki who have the resolve to kill but not to survive will not be able to beat their own Mushi."

While her eyes were emitting a sharp glint, the distortion of air gave birth to a shadow behind Inuko.

It was a Chestnut Tiger shrouded in purple lightning—Inuko's Mushi.

"I still haven't taught you about the ending known as Maturation. When their dreams are fully devoured by their Mushi, the host doesn't simply die, but their Mushi also gains their own will and go on a rampage. Got it, Shachito? The Mushi is not your slave. It is without a shred of doubt your enemy. A Mushitsuki who uses their powers willy-nilly will just be eaten by their Mushi and die."

"Uh—"

Being shown the overwhelming gap in power, Shachito was forcibly brought back to sanity.

He was made to notice his misunderstanding.

Even while using his Mushi, to say nothing of a mere fistfight, he had no

chances of winning— "...Uaaahhhh!"

Even so he couldn't run away.

If he were unable to stop Inuko here, Rio would lose her life. Shachito threw himself and tried tackling Inuko.

"Wah."

If I hit her at least once, he thought as he acted.

Yet unexpectedly, Shachito succeeded in pushing Inuko down.

"Wha—"

It was an unimaginable situation. Now that he straddled her he was confused.

"So you beat me. What will you do now?"

Having Inuko's movements sealed like this looked risqué.

What would he do now?

What did he have to do to stop Inuko?

"I'm asking if you have the resolve to kill me!"

Kill?

In order to save Rio, he had to kill Inuko.

He had never given any thought to this decision.

"You need to think about this before fighting, you moron."

Seeing Shachito hesitate, Inuko sighed.

"—You've barely passed. The training this time looks at a different kind of quality."

He couldn't follow Inuko's sudden change at all.

The girl's entire atmosphere changed as if her cruelty from before was a lie. She returned from being a battle expert to a mere raincoat girl.

"...Huh?"

"Why are you making a stupid face? I've already told you training's started when I left the bus stop."

Inuko's open hand grabbed Shachito's head.

"You've deduced my goal from the conversation and came here. That was first of all a test of your analytic abilities. I'll also praise you for coming to face me despite the gap in our strength. You've put into practice my teaching of fighting no matter what. Also choosing hand-to-hand fighting against me was also the right answer. It means you don't lack the good judgment to try and find even the smallest of chances against someone you can't win against."

Turning toward the dumbfounded Shachito, Inuko continued her speech.

"To sum it up, it was training to measure your aptitude for battle. I have to check it in preparation of the final test after all."

"Training...?"

Shachito's brain started working again. He squeezed out his voice to ask.

"Then, about you killing Rio-chan—"

"It was obviously a lie. Even rotten as I am, I'm a public servant. Of course I wouldn't become a murderer when it's not even for my mission. If this was a test to check your presence of mind, you would have a failing mark."

Seeing Inuko puff her cheeks and lecture him, he felt exhausted. This time he was undoubtedly angry.

"You little... Why would you make that lie, of all things?"

"I couldn't think of any other way to make you angry, so it can't be helped. Do you think there was any other way to make you face off against me for real except this?"

He didn't. Who would have ever fought this sort of monster seriously of their own will?

But now that he knew this, he finally relaxed.

Rio was safe.

"...Up with that... you bastard..."

As he exhaled, he was overwhelmed by fatigue. Since he had uncharacteristically given a lot of thought to many things and acted seriously,

he didn't feel like taking even a single step.

"If you understand then move. You're heavy and you're crushing me."

He gazed at the girl struggling underneath him.

"W-what's up with that look. If you still have complaints then I'll fight you again."

"...No, I was thinking of doing some indecent things to you as revenge."

"Move aside, you moron!"

The strike of the blushing girl's stick served as the clincher.

Turning a somersault and gazing up the starry sky, Shachito could see the dazzling moon shining over the city.

He felt relieved, yet he also felt not fully satisfied.

Although he had been able to protect Rio, the change inside him remained. He was able to pass Inuko's test—yet he wasn't even thinking about that. Never mind feeling accomplished, he didn't have any feeling that he finished the test at all.

There were the Shachito Inuko desired him to become, and the real, changing Shachito.

He could feel something slightly off between them.

But right now—

"I feel... exhausted..."

He was overwhelmed by everything and couldn't think anymore.

Shiohara Shachito's "aptitude exam".

—Passed.

3.04 The Others

The spats-wearing Rio advanced to the center of the venue where the final audition was being held.

"I am Masaki Rio. Thank you very much."

Due to her excessive tension, she was stiff even during her bow.

Starting with Jarre Harissi, the eyes of the audition judges focused on Rio. Together with Jarre, they were ten people composed of staff members and sponsors.

Intensely being stared all over, Rio flinched.

I've worked hard for today... so I must give it everything I have— She trying getting into it by thinking so, but couldn't stop shaking. She bit her lips and hid her nervousness.

The test was made of a few simple acting skits, basic dancing, pronunciation test, free form personal performance, and finally a personal request from Jarre.

The staff began the test. Starting by letting her change her expression based on various emotions, the test advanced to an improvised performance with another person.

The judges watched silently, at times commenting, and scored Rio.

Even as the test continued Rio was unable to shake off her anxiety. She feared the judges' gaze, especially that of the giant man Jarre Harissi sitting in front of her.

He seemed to be just like a giant predator. Just his presence watching over her turned into pressure, and so his already-huge body seemed to be growing even larger.

"...!"

A familiar sound began reverberating inside her ears.

It was a cracked metallic sound.

She could see black fog oozing out from the audition venue's walls, floor and ceiling. She felt a foul presence filling up the place.

Why now...!

Sweat covered Rio's brow.

What in the world was that voice that kept cornering her? Was she just hearing and seeing things due to her excessive pressure?

The black fog, or mysterious presence that could be called a miasma, intoxicated Rio's consciousness. Making an effort to continue her acting, she was gradually blanking out.

"Thou who are fit to become mine vessels... Thou shall now decide in front of me who fits better..."

She felt as if she heard a hoarse voice coming from somewhere.

It was like a dream; she didn't feel like she was moving her body out of her own volition.

"A performance by the book. It's good, but it has no personality."

The black miasma clung to one of the judges. In a complete change from their voices which was impersonal until now, they bore clear scorn and looked at Rio.

"Are you feeling the wall? Is your talent already at its limit?"

The black miasma moved to another staff member. He started torturing Rio with a sinister tone.

"You won't be able to pass like that."

"If we're simply talking about good acting there are plenty of other actors."

Every time the miasma moved to another person it became denser. Nearly gaining substance, it changed into something that looked like a black, filthy cloth—a robe.

The robe appearing and disappearing from her field of vision and the horribly

ear-grating metallic sound—her eyes grew dim, and by the excessive harassment of the ear-grating sound she became unable to tell if it all happened in reality or not.

Around the time she had to face the final test she finally realized the true identity of the repeated metallic sound.

It was similar to the sound of bells found in places such as churches.

Even while she was about to collapse from tension and dizziness, Rio still did her best to stand.

The final test was a free-form challenge from Jarre.

"You can speak English, right?"

The large man suddenly inquired.

"...Y-yes."

Slightly panting, Rio nodded. She attended Conversational English classes for the past several years.

"Have you received the script of 'Beast' along with the notification of you passing the second screening phase?"

Rio nodded. Her throat was parched and her stamina also reached its limits.

The musical "Beast", about to be opened in Oranje Land, was the play that allowed Jarre to receive an award for his performance on his golden years. He was still being paid royalties from theatrical companies all around the world, and it was famous enough to keep being performed. Since it was going to open up in Japan for the first time it grabbed the attention of the general public.

Even if it wasn't so, "Beast" was the musical that made Rio aim to become an actress. Never mind the Japanese translation, she had also watched the English version of the lines on video countless times and learned them by heart.

"Have you possibly already memorized the scene where the Beast and the protagonist meet for the first time?"

"Yes sir."

"You'll be the protagonist. I'll do the Beast."

Asserting this, Jarre rose from his seat.

With the staff members' sinister smiles at his back, Jarre exerted a pressure so powerful he didn't seem human. The black miasma wrapped around his body, forming the shape of a robe.

"Come, thou shalt fight now... Thou shalt indicate who fits better to become mine vessel..."

She could hear the hoarse voice again.

The musical "Beast" was a tragedy occurring in medieval Europe. During a civil war, a wounded enemy soldier wandered into an infirmary. Having lost his sanity after a battle, the warrior tries slaughtering all of the physicians and patients. Yet a young nurse persuades him and suppresses him, and she tries to restore him to his proper form by her warm nursing— "...!"

Jarre raised a howl. The entire hall seemed to shake.

Rio was swallowed up completely by Jarre's genuine acting. She couldn't even move a finger. Her knees trembling, she seemed about to collapse to a sitting position at any moment.

The authentic acting of a pro mercilessly unfolded in front of her. As she stood upright, the beast in the form of Jarre started slowly walking around her.

The scene in question started from the lines said by the protagonist played by Rio. Yet she couldn't move her mouth.

"...!"

The howl enveloped the hall, as if urging her lines.

"A-are you human? Or are you—"

Rio's voice, barely coming out of her mouth, was drowned by Jarre's war cry.

"You're ruthless."

The staff members exchanged smiles and spoke toward Jarre who was walking in circles around the girl.

"How about I devour you right here and now?"

Jarre was threatening the girl by shaking his large body and opening his

mouth wide.

I'm about to be eaten—

She reached her limits. Rio's mental strength couldn't withstand Jarre's presence.

My dream, too—

Her vision was distorted by tears.

Everything—

Her vision closed.

Her dream didn't matter anymore. She just wanted to run away from everything and relax.

As Rio was about to collapse on the spot, a shrill electrical sound echoed in her ears.

"...!"

She opened her eyes.

That noise came from her bag on the corner of the room.

Her cellphone informed the arrival of an email. As she was too nervous she had forgotten to turn it off.

She didn't even need to check in order to know who sent her this email; since she had lately become somewhat estranged from her classmates, they hadn't exchanged any emails for a while.

Shiohara Shachito. Right now, she couldn't think of anyone else who would send an email to her.

—Do your best, Rio-chan!

Shachito's encouraging voice was revived in her ears.

"A-are you human? Or are you—"

While clenching her teeth, Rio returned to acting.

"...!"

Yet once again her lines were erased by Jarre's roar. The large amount of miasma spewing out of the large man was directed at Rio as if to overpower her.

It was useless. The words she strained herself to say lacked any sense of presence.

Rio wrung out her remaining energy, fighting against Jarre's air of intimidation. Shaking off her tension, she heightened her focus. As she tried moving her limbs, some power returned to her pale body.

I can still do it—

"Are you human? Or are you a famished beast?"

Rio's voice, coming out of her stomach, echoed in the hall.

The roaring Jarre took a step back for an instant as if flinching back. The miasma filling the place looked as though it slightly scattered.

But soon Jarre widened his eyes.

"I am but a mere Beast!"

It was a shout in a heavy bass voice that felt as if it pounded Rio's entire body. The robe made of the coagulating miasma passed from the large man to her.

Fear was instantly revived in her.

Nevertheless, wrapped by the filthy robe, Rio clenched her molars and again emitted a clear voice.

"If so, why do you have the form of a man? Why do you speak the words of man?"

The robe soared from Rio's body. Rotating in the air and creating a whirlpool of miasma, it passed over to Jarre in the next moment.

The bearded man's expression warped. His whole body shook to intimidate Rio.

"I was human. Yet I am no longer human! By hurting, by being hurt, by all my suffering I have thrown away my humanity!"

The robe separated from Jarre as if bursting off. Returning to miasma, the

robe clung to Rio and then reassumed its shape.

"If you bore wounds then they can be healed. In being hurt beasts and humans are the same."

Once getting into her acting, all worldly thoughts were gone from Rio. She had practiced this scene countless times ever since her dream started. She felt confident that no other person admired "Beast" as much as she did.

"Yes, trample each other's dreams... I shall choose one of thee..."

The hoarse voice heard from somewhere was drowned by the exchange of Rio and Jarre's acting.

She could feel Jarre becoming passionate in his acting just like her.

He tried to devour Rio's acting, which, although unstable and brittle, was also overflowing with talent, drown her out by reading lines in a loud volume and employing overwhelming movements.

Yet Rio's act didn't stop. Her lines were those of the gentle nurse, but she kept acting strongly with her unwillingness to lose to Jarre.

In the beginning his acting was overwhelming, yet it started changing.

As the scene drew to a close, Jarre's expression showed impatience. Conversely Rio seemed more and more lively.

This was the difference between one whose dream was destroyed and one who kept dreaming.

—And the ending arrived.

"I shall heal you. Until you return to the form of a human—"

Bringing the violent conflict of acting to a finish were these calm lines filled with kindness.

A large crashing sound resounded.

With his face distorted, Jarre's back hit the table.

The one smiling calmly was Rio. As if fearing her calm gaze, the big man collapsed to the floor.

It was Rio's victory.

The miasma drifting around the conference room increased in density, swallowing Rio and Jarre.

A coarse voice whispered to Rio who was drunk on victory and to Jarre who was crushed with defeat.

"The match is settled... This vessel is worthy of me..."

This whisper oozing with joy overlapped with the voices of the staff covered by the miasma.

"A marvelous performance. You weren't inferior to mister Harissi."

"Not only that, look at him. How pathetic he was."

"How sad. Although he had quit active work, losing to such a girl..."

These merciless scorns assaulted Jarre who was holding his head.

Meanwhile Rio felt the best.

Her acting surpassed Jarre, who was once extolled as a famous actor.

"I will... not become like you."

Just like the staff members, Rio herself also directed a derisive smile towards the pitiful large man.

The sound of a bell echoed especially loud in the hall.

4.00 Shachito Part 6

The days passed slowly.

The number of emails decreased, but he noticed that they mainly came from girls. Yet when he tried recalling their correspondence, his thinking was led to a completely different direction.

As for his school life, it could be said to have changed.

There was no difference from the days when he concealed his status as a Mushitsuki and spent his days laughably.

And yet, why did—

"..."

Riding his So1o along the coastal road, Shachito looked at the sea through his goggles.

—Why did the scenery reflecting in his eyes seemed so different?

Had he really not noticed the beauty of this scene before?

Even when he went to school through the same road every morning.

And yet the wind hitting Shachito's skin, the sea sparkling from the morning sun, the smell of seawater tickling his nose, all of them were pleasant.

The world might be beautiful.

But at the same time, he also felt some misgivings about the way he lived his life so far.

Wasn't the world I've been living in been horribly twisted somewhere— He could feel the discomfort he'd noticed while viewing the album in his room increase every day.

What led to this was undoubtedly his meeting with the girl who could be

called nothing other than eccentric. The raincoat girl that suddenly appeared in front of him... The Mushitsuki girl who introduced herself as Shishidou Inuko said she would raise him into a warrior. Ever since then she forced him to go through battle training.

Ever since meeting Inuko, he had been involved in only dangerous happenings.

He'd fought against the monster known as *Shinpu*, and the other day he even ended up fighting Inuko herself. The days of being covered in fresh wounds continued.

And the broken Shachito that appeared every time he fought...

Was that from his talent as a warrior that Inuko had spoken about?

If so, then who on earth was the current Shachito who was able to spend his life peacefully?

"What's the strongest warrior, you ask?"

It happened yesterday.

Shishidou Inuko asked him back while he was collapsed on the beachside last night. He had asked her this after having received a unilateral spanking under the guise of hand-to-hand fighting and being knocked down.

What is the strongest warrior? Could someone as weak as me who couldn't even touch you with one finger become one? He asked.

"First of all, if you think of yourself as weak then start working on it seriously. What were those movements just now? You haven't even the slightest intention of beating me, right?"

Preaching him no matter what happened was Inuko's habit. She sighed, spun the hockey stick in her hand and put it on her back.

"There's no way I can beat you. Aren't you that strongest warrior or whatever, Inuko? What does it even mean in the first place. Are we inside a game or a manga? There are plenty of ways to become one, such as having a legendary sword or receiving a god's blessing."

"Don't play innocent about your own lack of seriousness and complain, you

moron. —It's true that I'm not the strongest despite reaching near that position, though. I was ultimately unable to become the strongest."

"Seriously? Is there anyone stronger than you?"

"There is. This is obvious, but only one person like that exists in the world."

Inuko's expression illuminated by the moonlight was proud despite not talking about herself. Yet it also seemed lonely and regretful.

There was a person this girl openly acknowledged despite being the crystallization of all battle techniques.

Shachito couldn't believe it. At the same time he felt curious.

"What kind of monster are they?"

"Not a monster at all. There are other Mushitsuki who could be called monsters. All the powerful Mushitsuki you probably don't know about like *Fuyuhotaru*, Harukiyo, or Ladybird. No, they're definitely as powerful as monsters. But you know..."

"...?"

"That strongest warrior is a mere Mushitsuki. Although only for a short while, I have watched his back, so I know this better than anyone."

Squinting, Inuko sat next to Shachito. Sitting cross-legged and gazing at the sea, the girl's profile showed a smile. She was probably reminiscing.

"—I can't possibly defeat him. I have more of the qualities of a warrior, and at the time I was surely superior to him in my fighting abilities. I surpassed him in analytic abilities, in rational thinking, in everything."

"..."

"And yet I felt like I couldn't win. No matter how much he was hurt, he stood up again and again. No matter how inferior he was, the decisive blow came from him. He fought, survived, and won. He seemed full of openings yet never broke down. He always looked like he was fighting something much larger than the opponent in front of him."

Inuko raised both of her hands and clenched them. As if she was holding

something important.

"I feel like there's some conclusive difference between him and us other Mushitsuki. But it's also something that anyone can possess in their heart... that's how I feel. I believe that he chooses to confront something that we don't notice or pretend not to notice."

Seeing the girl speak somewhat happily, a small emotion welled up inside Shachito.

The first emotion—it was so small that even he himself couldn't notice it, but perhaps it was envy. He knew at a glance that Inuko trusted that person.

"So you're saying... I can become like him?"

"That depends on you. No, it would be better to say it depends on you lot."

Inuko looked down at Shachito, a carefree smile on her face. It was his first time seeing her with that expression.

"I would actually like to coach all Mushitsuki by my own hands. But that has its limits. Therefore, I only give one-on-one lessons to those who have the makings to become 'warriors around my level'. If they're about as strong as I am they should be able to survive most battles. And if they're able to survive, it means there're more chances for them to understand what the strongest warrior possesses."

Perhaps intoxicated by the calm beachside wind, Inuko was in a great mood. She was probably reminded of the countless Mushitsuki she had brought up in the past.

"It's difficult to conceal you're a Mushitsuki and live in this world, Shachito. There are other people who, just like me, can sense the existence of other Mushitsuki. There's no perfect sensing ability as far as I know, though. Mushitsuki will definitely get involved in some fight for some reason or another. You can't live defenselessly."

"So basically... you're saying I have a talent for surviving?"

"Indeed. —Survive, Shachito. Even though this world is so beautiful, it's far harsher and crueler than you imagine. Yet you have the power to survive."

She said with a lonely smile. Unclenching her fists, she averted her eyes from Shachito.

"...But I hope that even if you fail at being a warrior you won't be disgraceful and pitiful like me."

"You're not pitiful at all."

He blurted out without thinking. Inuko widened her eyes and looked at his face.

"Well, wearing a raincoat is weird and you have no feminine sex appeal, though."

"Wow."

"But sometimes... Like when you've fought Shinpu, there were times you looked pretty cool, and you taught me all sorts of things—well, I can go along with you as long as I think of it as good exercise."

Inuko's hand about to draw out her hockey stick stopped in place.

"You don't look pitiful at all to me, Inuko."

He said while hiding his embarrassment, which seemed strange even to him. He should've been able to say words of that level already no matter the recipient.

He had the feeling he now understood the reason why Masaki Rio was always so bashful while talking to him.

She apparently constantly worried about whether he would accept her "true intentions" that she was trying to hide— "Thank you."

Now came Shachito's turn to be surprised.

He thought for sure that she would reply something like "even if you flatter me I won't go easy on you" with a light tone.

"Even if that's just sympathy, I'm glad you accept me."

But what differed from his expectations was Inuko's expression. Her smile vanished and she actually seemed hurt.

Thinking she had mistaken him to be sarcastic, Shachito became angry.

"I told you I don't pity you. I really think so. Since it's me saying that it may be hard to believe, but—"

"That's not it. It's just self-hatred. Please don't take offense."

She smiled as if to pacify him, standing up. This seemed to indicate their talk was over.

Yet Shachito's anger was not gone.

His words were light.

This was probably obvious from his usual speech and conduct. If he were his usual self, he wouldn't have become angry like that.

"...I'm telling you I really think so."

He felt pathetic being frustrated and asserting this.

"I know. It's just that I don't have the qualifications to accept your words. The one at fault is me for being a Mushitsuki with a certain sin."

"A sin?"

Shachito asked back, but Inuko didn't answer. She turned her back to him, walking on the sandy beach toward her parked Vespa.

"Shachito. You seem to be still trying to recall your dream, but—forget about it."

Yet her legs stopped midway. She spoke without even turning around.

"You're similar to me in everything. Starting from your fighting style to your condition of nearly breaking. So your dream is probably also... no, never mind."

"...?"

"You can go to school tomorrow. I'll be preparing your final test until the end of school day."

That was how he'd seen Inuko yesterday as she left.

Ever since the raincoat girl rode away on her Vespa, Shachito kept thinking alone.

What on earth was Inuko's sin?

And also—

"My dream, huh..."

As Shachito rode his beloved vehicle, his mutter rode the wind and vanished into the sea.

Even after reaching school the worries inside him were not gone.

He hadn't been there for a few days, but he chatted with his friends and went through classes just like always. Even when there was an inter-school announcement during lunch-time summoning him over his many absences, he skipped on it as always.

By the time afternoon classes started—Shachito's heart had retrieved its calm.

Even his dream, occupying his thoughts ever since morning, vanished from his mind. Fighting against *Shinpu* and receiving Inuko's training all felt like they belonged to a distant, bygone era.

"..."

Ignoring the voice of the teacher reading the textbook, he gazed at the scenery outside the window absentmindedly.

Something was strange—

Warning bells rang somewhere deep in his heart.

The time Shachito spent without fighting and getting hurt warped something inside him.

He felt some anxiety about him not caring about Mushitsuki, dreams and all that.

"...She said something about a final test. Maybe I'll just play hooky and go have some fun for a change."

He spontaneously mumbled to himself.

The blue sky that seemed so beautiful that morning stopped evoking any sort of emotion in him. This peaceful scenery stagnated, dulled, and became pleasant.

"Do rejoice, Shachi-kun!"

Shachito turned around with a start.

It was after school. A male student he was familiar with jumped at Shachito as he was trying to rise from his seat. He caught his shoulders tightly from both sides as if saying he won't let him escape.

"Don't scare me like this. And using 'do' like that is weird, really."

"Hah? Why're you surprised at that part. —More importantly, the mixer party we passed because of you cancelling in the last minute! I just got an email informing of its revival! It's a bit sudden but are you free now? You are, right?"

Shachito grew silent for a second. Today was going to be Inuko's final test.

He had to go for it.

He felt a premonition similar to impatience.

The world of "this side", filled with peace and pleasure, twisted Shachito's heart just like a drug— "I'm not free."

Shachito replied.

It was a sweet world where he would never fight anyone and never get hurt.

And Shachito—had no way to resist it.

"...Is what you thought I'd say, right?!"

With a full smile, Shachito joined shoulders with his friends. They raised a cheerful voice.

Even if he had no dream, Shachito felt satisfied in his current life.

No matter who they were, no one had the right to take it away from him.

"As expected from Shachi-san! We'll gather for you as many pretty girls as we can!"

"For real? For real?"

"Sure thing! I understand your tastes perfectly! Well, only because you always kept blabbing things like 'she isn't my type', 'I can't get excited about her' and all that."

"That's obvious. It's fun to cheer on some girl who's shining with hope—"

As he started saying this, Shachito's smile froze.

His reasoning power, about to descend into this peaceful world, was barely holding on by a lone string.

Always?

His type?

"Wha—"

His smile became tense.

He was aware of the fact that he liked cheering on his friends who made efforts aiming for something.

But something was different here—

The discomfort inside Shachito grew to the utmost extremes.

He had the feeling that there was a large deviation between what he thought of as "cheering" and how it looked to other people. That it was twisted.

"When you say always—what's that? What's my type—"

"Huh? What's up with that all of a sudden."

His friends exchanged glances. They spoke as if it was perfectly natural.

"Your type hasn't changed ever since middle school, right? You like girls who're giving their efforts to studying, clubs and stuff like that."

"Yup. It was awful last year. The first-year track-and-field club girl who went to the National Athletic Meet failed from the shock of breaking up with you. We're your bros, but that was just horrible."

His friend saying this cast a glance at the back of the class.

Following his gaze, he could see a female classmate biting her lips and leaving the class.

It was the girl who had called out Shachito to the corridor last month. The one who slapped his cheeks.

"That reaction, just like I thought... Shachi. So that rumor was true?"

"What rumor—"

"That you made a move on that girl from the brass band during their recital."

"Is that true, Shachi-san?! As expected from our school's playboy!"

Shachito saw the girl's back off absentmindedly.

"—N-no, I haven't done... anything like that."

He hadn't done anything?

Really?

"You see, that's why I said you were lying. You're doing it even now, right? I heard you're targeting what's her face from first year? The one who's into acting or whatever, they say she's going to perform in Oranje Land."

"Wow, that's totally in his strike zone."

"...No."

No.

He wanted to purely cheer on Rio, different from what he'd done until now—
"Until now"? What does that mean? What have I been doing until now— "...
Sorry, I can't go today after all."

Leaving this behind, Shachito flew out of the class. Voices of complaints concentrated behind him, but he ignored them.

He found the girl walking down the corridor and called out to her.

"Wait!"

The girl turned back. When he saw her expression, Shachito was once again astonished.

On the face of this girl who had slapped his cheek before—was now, without a doubt, an expression of disgust.

"What?"

"...Sorry, I'd like to talk to you for a bit. Come here."

"N-no, stop...!"

Pulling the arm of the reluctant girl, he brought her to an empty corner of the corridor.

"I said stop! Are you going to keep doing things to me...?"

With this abnormal gaze of anger, the girl managed to shake off Shachito's hands.

"Do things to you...?"

"I told you I wanted to end it, didn't I...! Please don't get involved with me anymore!"

Tears rose to the girl's eyes. Unable to understand what she was trying to say, Shachito couldn't do anything except show a faint smile.

"What... what have I done to you?"

He once again threw the same question as he did during the time she had slapped him.

The girl covered her mouth, shocked. She was probably trying to stop the sobbing that leaked out without thinking.

Contrary to his expectations of getting slapped again, the impact he had resolved himself against didn't come. The girl gazing at Shachito's face bit her lips and lowered her gaze. Clear drops fell to her feet as her shoulders shook.

"I was... so happy...! It was the first time anyone ever encouraged me... So I was also happy when you'd invite me to hang out as a breather, Shachito-kun... But the more I had fun being with you... the less I wanted to go through practice or anything else..."

Shachito widened his eyes.

While he was looking at the girl that spoke while sobbing, he started to recall what happened between them.

Until some time ago when she slapped him, he certainly had been going out with her. He went home with her, hanged out with her friends—they have shared a lot of time together. Yes, his room had been decorated with the photos of doing the same thing with all of his girlfriends.

"...But I thought it was all my fault... Since you were supporting me I felt like I didn't have to think about anything and that it was my fault for becoming so irresponsible..."

It was just like Inuko said when they had fought on the building in front of the station.

Shachito had no dream.

And so he wanted to share other people's dreams, spending his days rooting for them.

"So I... destroyed your dream."

Shachito muttered, still wearing a faint smile.

—Yet this wasn't everything.

There was another thing that Shachito's lacked.

"Pain"—

The other Shachito tried sharing even that with other people—

"But everyone is the same for you, Shachito-kun, right...? You said so, right?"

The girl raised her tear-stained face.

He felt the same no matter who it was—exactly so.

The figures of the peoples whose dreams Shachito had destroyed firmly remained in his memories. And they weren't just girls. He even got close to male friends and by inviting them to hang out with him made them lose their goals.

All in order to share a dream he didn't have.

And in order to share another thing he didn't have—pain.

"Say, when I'd destroyed your dream—"

A carefree smile rose to Shachito's face. The same friendly smile he always wore.

"—Did it hurt?"

A dry sound echoed through the corridor.

She slapped him for the second time.

Even as he held his cheek, the smile didn't vanish from Shachito's face.

"What, this doesn't hurt at all."

Finally, the girl broke down crying. She cried in a loud voice, not caring about being seen by other people.

A normal human would feel pity seeing that painful figure.

Yet Shachito felt nothing.

All because he had forgotten what "pain" was.

"Sorry for taking your time. Umm... what was your name again?"

Since he felt no pain, this wasn't a major incident for him. The girl's name he had supposedly remembered just now was gone from his mind. He had no interest in a girl who'd lost her dream.

Turning his back to the crying that became even more violent, he walked through the corridor. When he returned to the class to retrieve his bag and helmet his friends were no longer there.

"Ah, it's too late to go to the mixer party now. Oh well, I'll go to Inuko."

He headed to the main gate, humming. It was bothersome but he had nothing better to do, so he decided to go along with that final test or whatever. Since she called it "final", if he were to pass it he would probably no longer need any training.

"Shachito-senpai."

When he arrived at the shoe racks he could see Masaki Rio waiting there. She waved her hand lively, fitting for someone who aspired to become a great actress.

"Rio-chan!"

Shachito's expression sparkled again and he approached Rio.

"What? So you were able to come to school today? And you even waited for me."

"Yes."

Rio nodded, seemingly a bit embarrassed.

Her face that he hadn't seen in a while seemed to be overflowing with hope and confidence.

Shachito knew the reason for it.

Rio had splendidly passed her audition for the musical. She had already informed him about this by email, but since she had to go through concentrated practice for the performance that was just around the corner she took a break from school. He hadn't seen her in person ever since the day she had taken the final audition.

For him, who lived irresponsibly without wishing for anything, seeing her make her best efforts in pursuit of a single dream served as mental support.

He could feel himself sharing Rio's dream.

He only needed to share one other thing.

Picking up his motorcycle at the parking lot, he walked side-by-side with her.

"I am quitting school."

Rio's confession was sudden.

Shachito stopped in place without thinking.

"—Eh?"

"I have already decided this before the final audition. If I were accepted we would perform all over the country, and so I wouldn't be able to come to school. Also, once this play ends, I will go to Akamaki City and enter an authentic theatrical company."

Rio also stopped and turned around.

The girl lived true to her dream, yet her face was clouded with anxiousness.

"Even though I don't know whether I will be able to act well or not, I can't wait. But I want to try out doing whatever I can. My role now is not that important, but... I thought I would aim for the main role next."

Rio sent a serious expression at Shachito who stood stock still.

"Shachito-senpai... will you root for me?"

Shachito's surprised expression changed into a grin.

Rio also eased into a smile out of relief.

"Should you really be going this far?"

The girl's expression froze.

"...Eh?"

"No matter how hard you work, what's impossible is just impossible. Even if you purposely put pressure on yourself nothing will come out of it. And I wanna be by your side when that happens. It's better for you to receive as little damage as possible when you find out reality's tough and that your dream will never come true."

"..."

Rio gazed at Shachito in astonishment as he said this with a light smile.

"It won't always be like this—"

Shachito's mouth moved on its own.

"You're not going to have this kind of *luck* every time."

Rio's expression stiffened.

She looked like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the words for it.

"It's not... luck—"

Just like a doll, she moved only her mouth.

"Since I... have done my best..."

Before Shachito would add any further words, Rio dropped her gaze, her bangs hanging down.

"But I did my best because you cheered for me, Shachito-senpai...! Were you always looking at me like this? You're saying that I only passed by coincidence —"

Raising her face again, large tears spilled from the girl's eyes.

"So you are really are—a superficial and irresponsible person after all."

She turned around, ran and left Shachito.

While looking at her back—

"I said so from the start."

Shachito put a hand on his chest.

He felt some sort of small discomfort.

It was a tiny twinge, different from a heartbeat.

"—Maybe it hurts a bit?"

Wearing a faint smile, he put on his helmet.

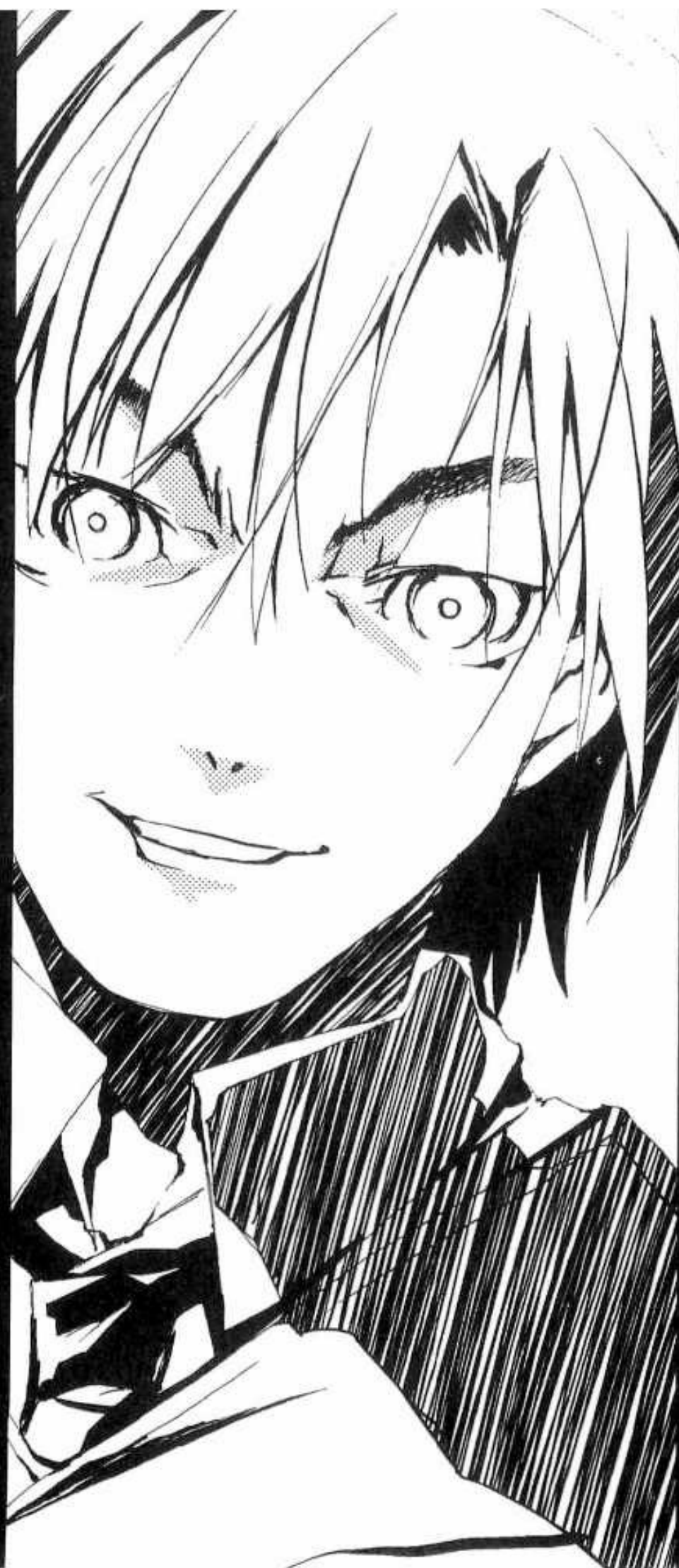
Equipping his goggles, he straddled his So1o and rode out of school.

While rushing through the city dyed by the orange sunset, Shachito kept smiling.

He completely retrieved his original form.

That was him.

He always lived like this until now. He only became close to people shining with dreams and hopes in order to witness the instant they lose that luster.



Since he had forgotten his own dream, he tried recalling it by sharing other people's dreams. Yet he was unable to do so no matter what, and always felt some discomfort.

Because of that, Shachito tried sharing the pain he had forgotten the same way.

Yet as expected he was unable to recall his pain.

Since he felt no pain, he would soon also forget other people's pain. Because of that, he didn't care at all about the people he had broken.

"Hmm."

While riding on his motorbike, he pressed on his chest.

Masaki Rio was also like all the other people he had gotten in contact with. They would shine with hope only for an instant, but were helplessly brittle. They would easily lose their confidence just by having Shachito simply shake them a bit.

And yet, different from until now, when he saw her crying, Shachito felt something akin to a small pain.

In that meaning, perhaps it was special.

Yet even the pain he'd felt for a split second was soon forgotten.

In the end, Shachito was unable to retrieve pain in its truest meaning.

Since he had no pain, his days were filled with peace.

His peaceful days, that had nothing to do with pain, would continue like this forever.

"So that girl's also no good already."

He rode his So10 with a carefree mood, heading toward his destination.

He had already been informed of the place where today's training would take place from an email sent by Shishidou Inuko. After riding his motorbike nonstop, he soon arrived there.

It probably used to be a printing factory. By entering a small path through the main street of the town center and advancing for a while, he reached vast

premises with no signboards.

Going through the rusted and unmoving fences, he parked his bike. Throwing off his helmet, he entered through the broken front entrance with his goggles still equipped.

"You're late, Shachito. Your test partners grew tired of waiting."

Inside this space, which was a mere cave with all of the machinery removed, was Inuko. Sitting on a window on the higher part of the wall, she looked down at Shachito and at "them".

"Hihah."

There was the scent of a battle.

The premonition of battle made Shachito wear a broken smile.

Standing in his way were three large monsters. They were beasts that seemed like distorted insects made large.

There were three teens near the monsters. They turned back to look at Shachito, seemingly surprised.

"They're all part of the resistance group that goes against the SEPB, Mushibane. I drove them all the way here for them to become your test partners. This is your first time fighting Minion Types, right?"

Although he was facing these unsightly beasts, Shachito didn't feel disturbed. He even felt disappointed as if their looks were just for show.

"Your final test is a real battle. Remember what I've taught you and fight. They shouldn't pose any problem to you."

Inuko's tone sounded convinced of Shachito's victory.

The group calling themselves Mushibane moved all at once. Perhaps judging him to be an enemy, they set their Mushi on him.

Shachito leapt back with light steps. Autumn Darters flew out of him.

The enemy couldn't even perceive Shachito as he evaded using instantaneous movements. As he distanced himself they looked for him frantically.

They wouldn't pose any problem. It was indeed so.

Compared to *Shinpu* or to Inuko whom he had fought before, they were equivalent to babies.

"...Listen, even if it's your first time fighting Minion Types, you shouldn't be so nervous."

Yet Inuko scolded him from above.

"Hmm?"

He looked at his own arm.

His uniform was torn and blood was flowing. He was apparently an instant too late in evading the attack.

"Hihah."

Not caring at all, he raised his face again.

Shachito could feel no pain. Such a wound would serve no obstacle to him fighting.

—Or so it should have been.

"...?"

He noticed a strange sensation running through his arm.

Throb, throb, it was a twinge as though a heart was beating through his arm. It hurt.

Along with the revived sense of pain, memories of the past flashed into his mind.

It was a pure-white sickroom.

Then middle school student Shachito received grievous injuries in a traffic accident and came to the verge of death. He miraculously regained his consciousness and his family was overjoyed.

But the real hell started afterward.

The germs entering through his wounds inflamed all of his joints. Shachito spent his days writhing in unimaginable pain.

He couldn't move because of the pain. He was unable to eat or even sleep. A

few seconds of pain felt like days to him.

While withstanding intense pain that seemed like it would drive him insane, Shachito was thinking.

Why am I the only one to go through such a—

Wrapped up in a blanket on his bed, Shachito always heard laughter around him. He heard the voices of visitors to the hospital, and of those who went outside.

Everyone except him felt no pain.

He was the only one suffering in the entire world.

I want to die... and if not—

He ended up thinking this.

I want everyone else to hurt and suffer like this—

Although he was in the midst of extreme agony, he had embraced an immature and selfish wish.

And the one to accept this wish was neither a god nor a demon.

Appearing along with the sounds of a bell was an abnormal being wrapped in a filthy robe.

And its name—was Shinpu.

—He remembered.

He recalled his dream.

The reason for Shachito to have become a Mushitsuki.

"..."

While staring at the blood running on his arm, Shachito wore a faint smile.

Until now he had seen the beautiful dreams of all sorts of people.

He thought that he would like for his dream to be as beautiful as theirs.

However—

"Hihah."

Could such a wish be even called a dream?

Did that dream turn him into a Mushitsuki?

It was the worst possible truth.

In order to forget that, Shachito had forgotten "pain".

He hated acknowledging the fact he had become a Mushitsuki due to that trifling dream, so for several years, he concealed his power.

In the end, everything he'd done until now—because of his dream, was the worst.

"..."

He looked at Inuko above.

The scent of battle—the battlefield caused the real Shachito to return.

He had only started thinking about things lately due to him fighting. Since he stopped concealing and further exposed his Mushitsuki self, he noticed too late that it served as the opportunity that led to the revival of his true self.

The one who had invited Shachito to battle was none other than Shishidou Inuko.

And Inuko knew this.

After all, she had never mentioned "which side" of Shachito was the broken one.

Shachito was helplessly twisted.

He was broken.

Yes, the real broken one was—

"So the broken one... was the part of me living irresponsibly and without thinking of anything, huh..."

The broken berserker, Shiohara Shachito.

The swarm of the assaulting Mushi was reflected in the eyes of this warrior discovered by Shishidou Inuko.

4.01 The Others

Her vision was blurry.

It shook, distorted, and trembled.

Transparent drops leaked on the ground at her feet.

Her vision slightly cleared up, yet soon the large tears flowing from her eyes made the scenery blurry again.

"..."

At some point rain started pouring on the town center of Holland City.

The rain, scattering here and there, washed Masaki Rio's tear marks.

The theatrical company which Rio belonged to had rented out a floor in the building where the audition took place for her practice.

In contrast to the front entrance facing the station, the backside of the building had neither lights nor any human presence.

Rio couldn't understand anything anymore.

She was told unimaginable things by Shachito and her mind was in shambles. Even so her legs naturally carried her to this building in an attempt to devote herself to practice.

"...Shachito-senpai..."

A hoarse voice spilled from Rio's mouth.

She didn't know why she was there.

She didn't know why she was seeing such a thing.

"He—"

A cracked bell sound was violently echoing from somewhere.

Every time it rang, the air became ever fouler. Even the rain that increased its vigor was encroached by the bell's sound and she felt as though it was clinging to her body.

Inside her vision, soggy due to her tears and the rain, something black other than the darkness was wriggling. That fog or smoke slowly coagulated, turning into a filthy robe.

"I welcome thee as mine vessel..."

She could hear a husky voice from somewhere.

White caterpillars slowly climbed on Rio's feet.

"—Help me..."

Having lost her light, Rio looked down at something.

It was a large, red circle. Mixing with the rain, it grew even larger.

What drew this circle was a large amount of fresh blood.

At the center of the fresh blood were the remains of a body as large as a bear.

The one dead with his mouth still agape in agony was undoubtedly the foreign famous actor— Jarre Harissi.

4.02 Inuko Part 5

The sound of the rain hitting the factory's roof was loud.

Sitting on the window, Shishidou Inuko wore a smile on her face with all of her might.

"F—"

It was merely a coincidence she'd reached Holland City.

But perhaps it was her destiny.

Making Inuko, who never believed in either gods or demons but only in her own power to think about "fate" was like a miracle in itself.

That was how much the boy she had happened across in Holland City resembled her.

Shiohara Shachito.

Or even if it was fate, perhaps it had started a long way before her meeting with him.

In the past Inuko was called a heaven-sent warrior, passing through countless battlefields. Yet she was only able to fight for an instant, and it was far too fleeting. During the time she had failed and had even doubted the reason for her own existence there was someone who had given her another way of living.

Inuko had been given a duty.

Her wishes had been granted by the Central Headquarters. Making use of her sensory abilities, she would search for the Mushitsuki that slipped away from the SEPB's eyes throughout the entire country. And so she was permitted to head out on a journey as a so-called "scout".

Yet her real duties were passing along her cultivated fighting techniques and raising the warriors who would shoulder the battles of the next generation.

She had raised countless Mushitsuki until now.

Her ideal was the strongest warrior who would never lose to anyone. The Mushitsuki coached by her would probably soon be thrown into real battles and freely exhibit their possibilities.

Even so, a deep despair remained as an aftertaste deep inside Inuko's heart.

However, she had met Shachito in this city.

He was a Mushitsuki blessed with a sense for battle as if he was her clone. He absorbed her teaching just like silk floss could absorb water, learning rapidly.

He was another Inuko.

He was another berserker.

"F...f—"

Looking down at the scene below her, a shiver welled up from the depth of Inuko's body.

Everything happened due to fate.

Even though she grasped all battle techniques, she had been abandoned on the battlefield.

Like an empty, cast-off husk, Inuko had drifted to Holland City at the end of her lone journey.

Everything was in order to complete the berserker known as Shiohara Shachito.

Inuko had finally happened upon the strongest warrior.

"...ts..."

—Or so she thought.

"It hurts..."

Inuko's expression warped rapidly.

Inuko had never doubted the birth of her successor, yet a much too painful scene was reflected in her eyes.

Silence returned to the abandoned factory.

Never mind the Mushi, there were no signs of any of the Mushibane members either. It was after they had all run away from the factory.

One could only hear the fierce sound of rain and a servile, weak groan.

In the center of the building, Shiohara Shachito curled up in a fetal position.

His whole body was covered in wounds inflicted by Mushi. Yet none of them were life-threatening. Once they had realized he stopped moving and resisting—judging that continuing to fight him would be pointless, they left him behind and ran away.

Falling to this awkward form, there were no traces of Shachito's talent as a warrior.

"It hurts... It hurts..."

The only thing there was a loser.

It wasn't just Shachito.

Inuko was also included.

Inuko's despair-filled mutter echoed in the factory that contained nothing but failures.

"F...failed."

Shishidou Inuko's "final test".

The target was Shiohara Shachito.

—Failed.

5.00 Shachito Part 7

The scent of spring started wafting in the sea breeze blowing through Holland City.

Influenced by the reorganization of the studies program, the closing ceremony of Horanto High School was held earlier than usual.

All of the students gathered in the gymnasium seemed to want to enjoy their spring break as soon as possible. They were impatiently listening to the principal's lengthy speech.

Shiohara Shachito was also one of these students.

He gazed at the principal standing on top of the stage with a grinning expression.

"..."

His cellphone vibrated in his pocket. Stealthily concealing it in his hand, he checked the LCD screen.

He received one email.

Its sender was someone whose existence he had forgotten about for the past couple of days.

—Tonight's the premiere. Will you not come watch it?

Masaki Rio.

I think I knew her, remembering only this, he operated the buttons with accustomed finger movements.

Delete this mail?

YES.

By the time he had returned it to his pocket again, he already forgot all about

the girl known as Masaki Rio.

"An email? Who was it from?"

"Hmm? Some girl I used to know. But I instantly deleted it though?"

As his friend asked in a hushed voice he replied to him with a light tone. Including Shachito, several male students stifled their laughter.

Glaring at the indecent behavior of Shachito and the rest, the principal sighed. He closed his speech, seemingly tired, and dismissed everyone.

"So lucky. His speech went for so long."

"He probably thought Shachi laughed about his head right? I mean, no matter how you look at it..."

"Haha. When the new school term starts, he should put a bird nest on it."

The students all started heading for their own classrooms.

Shachito also passed through the main corridor, trying to enter the campus.

Yet seeing something yellow fluttering on top of the school roof, he stopped without thinking.

Thump, his heart throbbed.

As if a switch had been pressed—

As if he had been flipped outside out—

Shachito's pupils, that were cloudy until now, retrieved their light.

"Inu—"

He was about to exclaim in a loud voice without caring about his surroundings. Yet he realized it was simply a plastic bag that flew with the wind and got stuck on the lightning rod.

It wasn't the yellow raincoat that would invite Shachito to a battle.

"Shachi? What's wrong?"

"N-no, it's nothing. It's nothing, really..."

Even while feigning calmness on the surface, Shachito's chest was assaulted

by violent heartbeats.

Shaking his head, he also shook off the illusion of the raincoat-clad girl.

"You won't cancel out at the last minute like you did before, right? We're going to hang out with the girls we met yesterday today as well."

"There's no way I'm not going. After I finally found the perfect girl for my tastes in a long while."

Glossing over his disturbance with a faint smile, he followed his classmates in small steps.

"Ouch...!"

He bumped into another student. A dull pain ran through the shoulder he put his arm on.

Although it was just this, Shachito's feet became paralyzed with fear. Grabbing the fence, he was barely able to avoid collapsing. Without noticing his abnormality, his classmates kept walking ahead.

Suddenly becoming helpless, he felt fear.

The world Shachito lived in wasn't supposed to be this frightening.

Going off the corridor to the courtyard, he waited for the crowds of students to pass.

"It hurts..."

He looked up at the plastic bag fluttering up on the rooftop.

—Shachito had retrieved his previous peaceful life.

He had gone through the "final test" in the abandoned factory, yet it felt like something that happened long ago. That day, when he came back to himself, there was no one in the factory. Never mind those Mushibane people, but there was not even any sign of that girl in the raincoat.

Ever since then, Shishidou Inuko made no appearance in front of him.

He couldn't think he'd passed the test.

It was probably the exact opposite. Seeing how pathetic and pitiful Shachito

was in front of her eyes, she probably realized that her expectations were mistaken.

Thus Shachito returned to his peaceful daily life.

Even if it wasn't brought by fulfilling his promise to become stronger than Inuko, nor as a punishment from her—it brought him only dejection and apathy.

Effectively Shachito had fulfilled his original goal.

But even so—

"Inuko..."

Shachito had recovered even his "pain".

The fear that had once tormented him was reborn every time he felt pain.

Every time he saw something yellow, every time he felt pain, he would recall Shishidou Inuko.

And as he recalled her, he would come to his senses as the broken Shachito.

The girl who had taught him how to fight with his Mushi had not gone so far as to teach him how to fight with "pain".

"..."

He looked at the crowds of students moving toward the classrooms.

Once he joined them again, he would turn into the Shachito of "this side".

He would break again—

Turning on his heels, Shachito kicked the ground. Cutting across the courtyard, he went through the main gate and into the parking area.

Pulling out his So1o, he straddled it without even wearing a helmet or goggles. The shrill engine sounds reverberated throughout Horanto High School.

"Don't screw with me—"

Grimacing, he started riding towards the town center.

What urged Shachito was not anger; it was pure fear and panic.

"Are you really going to throw me away when I'm like this...!"

The daily life Shachito had thought of as belonging to "this side" was completely twisted. The Shachito of "that side", recalled by battle, was his genuine self.

He had forgotten pain so that he could forget his dream.

He wanted everyone except him to be hurt and suffer— It was the worst possible dream.

His dream of wishing to have a beautiful dream was like a curse, an egotistic desire.

And in order to recall this dream he had continually destroyed countless dreams until now— "Are you really going to disappear after making me remember all of this...!"

Shachito remembered it all.

And what made him remember were undoubtedly the battles Inuko had put him through.

Shachito could retrieve his real self only when he was on a battlefield— "Inuko...!"

Searching for the Vespa-riding girl, Shachito wandered around the town center.

The crossroads where he had first fought a Mushitsuki.

The back-alley where he had met Inuko.

The building where he had fought Inuko.

"Inuko...!"

Shachito desperately searched for her, but there were no signs of her anywhere.

"Why, Inuko...!"

He was afraid of going back to his normal life.

Returning to his twisted self again was scary.

—No.

"Is it because I was unable to become a warrior...?"

Living itself was pain.

Shachito, who had turned to a Mushitsuki with the worst dream, became twisted due to living by forgetting his dream, enjoyed destroying other people's dreams, and thus degraded into the worst kind of person.

"So you're abandoning me—"

If he were to be distanced from battle, he would destroy someone's dream again.

Yet since he feared pain, he could fight no longer.

Was there any reason for him to live?

"INUKOOO!"

Unable to withstand it any longer, he shouted in an alley without any pedestrians. He made a mistake in handling the motorbike, so the wheels slipped on a water puddle. He was thrown from his seat and crashed into the ground.

"...Ouch... it hurts... Inuko..."

Shachito curled his body, shaking, with tears spilling from his eyes.

Without Inuko, he would go back to his broken daily life again.

That was unbearably scary, and it made him feel helplessly guilty.

"What am I supposed to do... Don't abandon me... Inuko..."

A berserker who couldn't fight—

The remains of the man who had been unable to bear his dream writhed pitifully in the gloomy alley.

5.01 Inuko The Last

On the zenith of a radio tower from where one could see the sea, Shishidou Inuko was hit by the sea breeze.

The townscape of Holland City spread behind her back.

"..."

Sitting on top of the cold steel, she gazed at the rippling sea with a blank expression.

The truth thrust in front of her eyes in that empty factory... It took her several days to accept it as it was.

And as she did, she became unable to think of anything.

Only a gaping, dark emptiness occupied her chest.

As Inuko gazed into the sea, the scenery of that abandoned factory flashed in the back of her mind.

"Uu..."

She held her head with shaking hands.

"Uuuh... Uuuuuh..."

Her normal thinking ability paralyzed, she fell into a state of panic.

Inuko's face, hit by the wind, seemed much more haggard when compared to a few days ago. When she closed her eyes she would recall Shachito's pitiful form. Never mind sleeping, she couldn't even eat properly.

The lollipop in her mouth was cracked by her molars.

"Uuuh... Uaaah...!"

What in the world had she done wrong?

Had she made any mistakes in her teaching methods?

Or was the problem in Shachito?

No, he was perfect. Even though he hadn't learnt from her seriously, his natural talent absorbed all of it, and even on a mental level he was the right amount of "broken" to be unable to live without fighting.

Inuko herself also gave him the perfect training.

She was supposed to have finally gotten her hands on the strongest warrior.

It was supposed to be the culmination of her duty.

He was supposed to signify her life—to become her life witness, one who would forgive her still being alive.

This meant that at the very, very end, fate had decided to betray Inuko.

"I was... I was...! I was supposed to be forgiven...! If only I'd managed to perfect Shachito into a warrior, I was...!"

As her face distorted in agony, there were no traces of the combatant once feared as a berserker in it.

Shachito was also a berserker like her.

To the extent she believed without any doubt he would become stronger.

And of all things, even their dreams closely resembled each other.

Now that he had been reminded of his dream, and thus of his fear and despair, he would probably become unable to fight ever again.

A warrior scared of getting hurt? What a bad joke.

In the past, Inuko also lost in a battle as a result of recalling her dream. And she had lost the power to resist her own Mushi.

Mushitsuki cannot choose dreams.

As Inuko had embraced an evil dream, she had no way of resisting the Mushi nesting inside her. Because she had no reason to protect that dream.

That was why, instead of a dream, she needed a reason to live. If she obtained a heart obsessed with life she would be able to resist her Mushi.

Inuko lost her duty, so she couldn't live anymore—

"I won't have any more chances. ...Was it all for nothing? Was it all meaningless? Everything I've done so far, even my life, it was all...!"

She had no spares for the candy in her mouth anymore. It was the last.

The candies provided by the SEPB contained plenty of iron easy to digest for humans. If Inuko didn't have those in her mouth, she would soon become anemic. That was because as a backlash of the ability to control magnetism, the iron in her blood was consumed abnormally fast.

But even having the candy was no more than prolonging her life.

Now that she had used too much of her power in the city, she had little remaining time. Even now that she was like this Inuko's fatigued mind and body raised a shriek.

"So that means I'm also destined to be removed from the next battle as well...!"

In the past there were many fights that could be called decisive battles.

When *Fuyuhotaru* had been detained for the first time, Inuko couldn't participate as she was still in training. This could be said to be the first big battle.

The next big battle was on Aoharima Island. It was the operation to annihilate *Sanbikime*, one of the Original Three.

But by that time Inuko had already lost her ability to fight. She had sunk into despair and was also on the verge of losing her very reason for living.

There were also battles she didn't know about. There were few people who knew about the incident where the lance-user girl disappeared from the battle of Mushitsuki. Since Inuko had only recovered there was no way she could have participated.

Finally, there was last year's Christmas Eve.

The decisive fight against Lady Bird at Hashiba City.

Inuko herself who was in the middle of her journey obviously couldn't take

part in it, but even the students she had personally trained were still developing. Since they were still growing, they all had their hands full in their own fights.

Being grown as a warrior, she should have had no other path of living other than the battlefield.

Yet Inuko kept being entirely left behind in important fights.

"...I can definitely feel the scent of the next battle... And yet I'm... not allowed to live as a warrior, and they won't even let me die as a warrior... or leave any proof of my life as a warrior...!"

Die as a pathetic loser—

She felt as if fate personally declared this to her.

"Ha—haha..."

Crossing over despair, she started laughing.

"A meaningless life actually feels quite refreshing..."

Perhaps having nothing left and vanish inconspicuously would be fine. Such feelings welled from the bottom of her heart. There was no more meaning to keep living in disgrace like this.

But there was something she had to do before vanishing.

She had to apologize.

Since Inuko had disappeared from the battlefield, there was no doubt that he had already forgotten about her. Since he only looked ahead, he would take no notice of someone clinging to him from behind, writhing desperately.

And yet Inuko had to apologize. She only lived so far so that she could catch up to him and fight alongside him. She decided to use her little remaining time to apologize to him.

She pulled out her cellphone and dialed. It was a number not directly connected through the organization, meaning a rule breach of the SEPB.

After a few rings, the other side replied.

"Yo, it's been a while. How are you?"

As she spoke with a voice as bright as she could make it, a bored-sounding voice replied to her. Because it was amusing to tease him during times they weren't fighting, she played with him often in the past.

"Don't call me Wanko^[7]! Since you're calling me like that the entire East Central Branch does that too. —Hmm? No, I don't have any business with you really. Just thought of renewing an old friendship. By the way, what are you doing now?"

She heard a sigh. He appeared to not be in the middle of a mission, so he probably gave up and resolved himself with becoming Inuko's conversation partner.

"Oh, so you're heading to Nishito City, that's a nice place. You seem to be as busy as always. —Yeah, I'm on my journey. I'm at a city with a nice ocean view, it's called Holland City. It might be similar to Ouka City. It reminds me of the days I've trained with you. —Haha, maybe, but whatever you say, you weren't able to beat me in hand-to-hand training even once. No no, there's no mistake, I won every time."

Although she had forgotten her family, everything related to combat stayed in her memories.

Inuko was a pure warrior—to an ironic extent.

"Oh, come on, let's reminiscence for a bit. Once that whole *Fuyuhotaru* fiasco was over I've been transferred to Central Headquarters, and we've both made a name for ourselves. When powerful Mushitsuki were discovered somewhere, we would be dispatched as a special team—that's not true, we were the best tag team. Well, there were times when I was a bit out of control and hit you by accident, that's true."

Her past as a warrior wasn't that bad that she couldn't boast of it. Yet Inuko kept speaking, and even though the person on the other side was careless, he kept going along with the conversation.

"Right, you remember that fight? That time when we quarreled after annihilating our target and then fought for real. I've broken my stick, but I also broke your ribs. Even so, when you—"

However, perhaps tired of the long reminiscing, the person on the other side cut the conversation with a forceful "but more importantly".

"Huh? You're asking me what I'm doing? I said this before, I'm at Holland City —"

She tried replying back, yet the other side interrupted her again.

"...Eh...?"

A foolish sound leaked out of her mouth unconsciously.

—*When will you be able to return to the frontlines?*

The other side, whose face she couldn't see, said this.

"I-I'm— I'm—"

She couldn't talk.

It took everything she had to understand what the other side had said to her.

Then does that mean that even though you're only looking ahead... you're still seeing me even now...?

Even though the person in question had given up on it just now.

Even though she couldn't fight anymore, he was still waiting for her—

"...Yeah, yeah. I'm listening. Both about Fuyuhotaru escaping and about the disk. Yeah, that's right. I'm sure it'll turn out like that. Yes, she's probably holding the key."

He hadn't noticed Inuko's pitiful feelings of defeat at all. He kept talking about the upcoming battles as always. And although Inuko decided to stop in place, he spoke to her about the future without a doubt in his heart.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..."

As Inuko kept nodding, a drop fell to the ground at her feet.

The one to not believe in Inuko was none other than Inuko herself.

Ah, I hate this—

From the bottom of her heart.

I won't be able to fight together with you ever again—

An unbearable regret welled up inside her.

Full of despair and pitifulness, she almost forgot even such pure emotions.

She felt as if she could finally understand the source of his strength.

"—Hey, I have something to ask you."

As Inuko asked this, a serene smile rose to her face.

She hated it all so much.

The fact she wouldn't be able to stand on the battlefield with him again was unbearable.

Yet she felt that it didn't matter to him—that's how strong he still was.

"After losing me as your superior partner, you've found the new partner known as the spear user—Oh my, what a violent reaction. But it's rejected."

A laugh leaked from her mouth. Yet she soon inquired in a serious voice.

"Ever since losing that girl, have you kept fighting all by yourself...?"

The person on the other side sank into silence. Inuko knew well this meant yes.

"I see. ...You're strong. You kept winning all alone, shouldered everything on your own, and you'll probably keep getting hurt all by yourself. But you know, there will definitely come a time when you can't win by yourself. I can sense a battle that big approaching."

He mumbled an answer.

—I don't want to be told this by Wanko, who never comes back.

She was happy at him calling her name.

"That's not me."

Yet Inuko denied his words.

Thanks to him keeping on fighting even now, she recalled.

Inuko had taught countless Mushitsuki how to fight until now. At the same

time, this meant that they were fated to live as warrior because of her.

Much like the Original Three.

Her own actions, inviting them into battle without giving them a choice, were perhaps just like that.

But there was a definite difference.

"Those I've raised will eventually fight together with you."

It was Inuko herself who said the following to Shinpu, one of the Original Three.

—You can't even begin to imagine our "possibilities".

What Inuko taught was merely ways to fight. She truly entrusted her hopes with her students' possibilities.

Inuko's own life, helplessly unable to join battles, was pitiful.

Yet no one could ever deny the possibilities of those she had brought up by her own hands.

"My power alone isn't a big deal. But the great power of the new generation I've raised will soon cut into your fight. They won't let you monopolize it anymore."

He went silent for a while, but then asserted bluntly.

—I don't expect anything, but I'll be waiting.

These were curt words typical of him. But that was fine. At least for now.

"Ah... the battle calls me."

Still grasping her cellphone, Inuko stood up.

Turning her back to the sea, she gazed down at the Holland City townscape.

Inuko's sensing abilities perceived evil waves wandering through the city. It was a much larger and fouler presence than she felt last time.

The sky, dyed orange by the sunset, was being encroached by black clouds.

"They're inviting me for battle... I gotta go."

As Inuko looked down, there were no traces of hesitation on her face. The person on the other side asked her what happened, so she asserted him shortly.

"From now on the SEPB might be targeted. Please be careful."

The news that *Shinpu* had assaulted the branch in control of Holland City would surely reach his ears before long. Since it was him, he should be able to understand the situation without any stupid prejudices.

"See you later... *Kakkou*."

As Inuko hanged up the phone, the sounds of a bell that seemed to shake the air reached her ears.

She firmly grasped the waves of *Shinpu*.

As she thought—he still existed.

Some time ago she had defeated his wave and the strange corpse of a man from Akamaki City was left behind. Ever since then Inuko kept thinking.

What was *Shinpu*?

What were his abilities and special characteristics?

"I found out the truth about you, *Shinpu*."

It was a powerful wave incomparable to how it was before. Did that mean he no longer needed to hide his form? He moved through the city with astounding speed.

"If my thinking is correct... You're definitely not immortal."

Purple lightning surged through Inuko's body. She equipped the goggles hanging from her neck.

Leaping above the radio tower, she fell toward the surface. By repulsing her magnetic field from the radio tower's while midair, she soared toward the sky covered by dark clouds.

Immediately losing her speed, she rotated her body just before she crashed into a building. In the instant before both her legs hit the walls, she once again amplified their magnetic fields and repulsed them.

The distance between Inuko, teleporting through the upper skies of Holland

City, and *Shinpu*, who was moving on the ground, was gradually shortened.

"T-this is..."

Finally grasping the source of the wave, Inuko gasped.

A foul, dark mass rushed ahead through the main street of the town center. It was spouting miasma that completely covered the middle of the two-lane road where Shachito had once met another Mushitsuki.

One of *Shinpu*'s powers, as hypothesized by Inuko, could be said to be the ability of camouflage. Rather than hiding himself, he was able to isolate the existence of his domain from the consciousness of normal people. Unless one had an intense will it would be difficult ascertaining his existence.

Although they couldn't perceive it, those running into the miasma appeared to suffer some abnormality. The pedestrians and drivers all grimaced.

"How dreadful. How on earth has he increased his power so much..."

As the miasma was much too thick, she could see nothing except the edges of the filthy robe in the center of the darkness. She couldn't even see what sort of flesh was under the hood flickering in and out of sight inside.

He apparently noticed Inuko was pursuing him by moving from building to building. *Shinpu*'s robe wriggled in the center of the miasma. The hood looking up to the girl contained, as expected, nothing but darkness.

"You lack nothing as my opponent."

Inuko wore a twisted smile. There was no bigger joy for a warrior than their enemy being strong.

"Do head to where you please. I will let you choose your grave."

There were too many unrelated people there to launch a preemptive strike. Even so, if *Shinpu* stopped even once, she had no intention of hesitating. Her berserker blood was boiling.

Thinking she should ask for backup from the local branch, she pulled out her cellphone. She didn't think they would be of use, but they could at least serve as a decoy to allow her to land a killing blow. Being fixated on fighting one-on-one was sheer stupidity, and using a decoy was also a fine tactic.

"..."

Yet she was reminded of the strongest warrior she had spoken to just now on that phone.

What would he have done?

She didn't even have to think about it. Since he continued shouldering everything alone, he would obviously keep fighting by himself even at such a time.

"Ah... I see."

Inuko finally understood his feelings.

"What you wish for is not to fight alone. You just believe that you're the only one who can survive such predicaments, huh. ...What a conceited bastard."

He showed kindness in strange situations, yet there also the side of him known as a cold-hearted demon.

Which of them was his real him?

"To enemies he can be as cruel as possible... but to allies he's too kind that they can't understand it. What demon are you talking about, isn't he more human than anyone? Or maybe that means—since I was about to lose even such humanity, that I was the real monster?"

Did this mean Inuko let the Mushi possessing her eat even her very heart?

She returned the cellphone to her pocket.

"I also still have a ways to go. I keep learning new things even at the very end."

Her twisted smile changed into a calm one.

"I wanted to smash your conceit as thanks for teaching me this. Not by being acknowledged by you, but by smacking your cheeks and making you acknowledge it by force. —No, that's no longer my duty."

Moving below her, *Shinpu* finally left the town center.

Since there were no more tall buildings around, Inuko lowered to the surface. Jumping on power lines, she used magnetism as a foothold and ran at high

speeds, tailing *Shinpu*.

Leaving the townscape filled with lights behind, she ran parallel to the now-silent national highway.

Soon seeing what appeared in front of her eyes, Inuko realized what *Shinpu*'s destination was.

"So it's Oranje Land...!"

The beautiful and fantastic swarms of light spread out from afar.

The light was especially strong in the area of the crowded facilities including the Concertgebouw. She could also see the reconstruction of a repatriation ship floating in the center of the man-made pond. There were also revolving lights coming from windmills on the vast grounds here and there.

Furthermore, the dome built right next to Oranje Land was vivid as well. It looked as if a massive disk of light was stretched out on the ground.

"Hmm—"

Shinpu's moving speed suddenly increased sharply. Zigzagging on the road in front of the premises, he leapt over the fences and entered Oranje Land.

There were barely any people in the windmill area. Come to think of it, Inuko recalled that tonight was the premiere of the musical "Beast". She knew that civilians would gather in the area of the Concertgebouw.

Even the mass of miasma seemed to be heading there.

"And this is where we'll stop playing tag."

Leaping over the fences, Inuko's figure left an afterimage and vanished.

Shrouded in purple lightning, Inuko teleported in front of the robe covered in a dark fog.

Her hockey stick slammed *Shinpu* together with the miasma directly downward.

"Won't you fight me, *Shinpu*?"

As the robe was hurled helplessly toward the night sky, Inuko teleported overhead. She enhanced her magnetic field, at the same time adding

magnetism to *Shinpu* himself.

Inuko's stick flashed. Repulsed by the powerful magnetism, *Shinpu* was knocked off toward the ground.

A tremor shook the area.

The ground caved in as if a meteorite had crashed, but the remaining momentum caused *Shinpu* to bounce away, crashing into a windmill.

Inuko alighted herself on the ground, rotating her stick and readying it.

"So it's just like I thought. Your miasma... it resembles the ability of the warrior *Kasuou*, but unlike her it can't defend against physical attacks. Also, that filthy robe as well as what's 'inside' it undoubtedly have physical substance."

The outskirts of Oranje Land have been decided as the battlefield. There were many windmills dressed up in lights around, but during the night there weren't many sightseers. The small man-made pond was nearby, reflecting on its surface the lights from the windmills.

"Then I just need to keep my hit-and-run tactics and inflict damage until I fully annihilate you. —Originally, being unable to use your abilities outside of your domain and lack of mobility are Special Type weaknesses, but... since I overcame that with my teleportation, don't expect me to leave any opening."

Making this gallant declaration, Inuko's eyes reflected the figure of the robe standing up in front of the windmill.

—It happened without any advance warning.

"...If thou insist to block my way—"

Miasma filled the surroundings.

Even faster than the blink of an eye, the area Inuko and *Shinpu* were in was covered by darkness. The sky was covered by black clouds and the air was rapidly becoming foul.

Even the electrical decorations were swallowed up, and the surrounding space was polluted.

"Thou shalt become my flesh and blood... my child."

The sound of a bell reverberated.

The encroaching sound started transforming the surrounding ground in the speed of sound.

The soil and asphalt beneath Inuko's feet were changing into a swarm of caterpillars.

"My new vessel has already become completely mine..."

"So what you're trying to say is that your 'vessel' or whatever is different than that good-for-nothing one you've had before."

Inuko's body lightly floated in air. Leaping high, she landed on top of a windmill that wasn't encroached by the caterpillars. When she spun her stick, the foul air was gone from around her.

"But that's my line. Burn the true form of a berserker into your eyes."

A violent electrical discharge burst from the front of her raincoat. Inuko expanded her domain to push back *Shinpu*'s miasma.

Having turned into a mass of purple lightning, Inuko's face quickly distorted. The influence of the two kinds of magnetic fields—attraction and repulsion—caused her right eye to become bloodshot and increased the iron concentration in her left eye, so that they differed in color.

Falling into a kind of trance, her beastlike, sharp eyes perceived *Shinpu*.

"GAAAAAAAH!!!"

Inuko's roar and the sounds of destruction came at almost the same time.

Teleporting above *Shinpu* and swinging down her stick, Inuko crushed even the windmill and the ground behind him to smithereens.

The caterpillars gushing on the ground snapped into two just like in the story of Moses and the Ten Commandments.

The powerful blow annihilated part of the dark miasma covering the robe.

But the tens of thousands of caterpillars became a large wave and surrounded Inuko. The robe shrouded by the miasma moved among them and vanished.

"WOOOOOH!!!"

However, Inuko's sensing abilities were able to precisely pinpoint the location of the retreating robe. Rotating her hockey stick above her head, she vigorously pounded the ground.

Purple lightning burst.

The area with Inuko at its center caused the very air to tremble by the disturbance of the violent magnetic field. Due to the electrical discharge and rising of temperature, the water filling the man-made pond was evaporated along with the caterpillars.

The damage reached even *Shinpu*, who she could now see as her vision became clear. Once again a large part of the dark haze shrouding the robe scattered and vanished.

Bell sounds echoed high overhead.

A crumbling church appeared in the starless night sky. Inuko's surroundings were rapidly being covered by the domain of darkness.

Yet her teleportation was faster. She broke through the domain produced by *Shinpu*, instantly moving to behind the robe.

Inuko's hockey stick swept him aside.

The impact like a lightning strike blew apart the dark miasma. Shaving the ground, it threw *Shinpu* a long distance.

—When she went all out, Inuko possessed destructive power on par with a Rank 1.

She hadn't been made a Rank 1 on her golden days perhaps due to her inclination to lose her temper while fighting, or perhaps since she had a time limit to how long she could pull out her full power—there was even possibly something special in Rank 1 she didn't know about, but in the end it didn't happen and she never found out the reason for it.

"...I saw that your real body isn't that human form inside."



Shinpu roused his body, swaying, while Inuko glared at him with the face of a beast. The impact she had given him caused the robe's worn-out sleeves to change into caterpillars, falling to the ground like muddy blood.

"That filthy robe is your real form. The ones taking the form of a robe are the caterpillars making up your real body... so those caterpillars created when you attack are simply nothing more than the embodiment of your ability. —If either the activator which is the Church floating in the sky or your real body made of the caterpillars are annihilated, you'll be destroyed."

Regarding the insight to fully analyze the enemy's ability, Inuko was second to none.

Natural talent and long years of battle experience allowed her to see through *Shinpu*.

"And you apparently require a 'vessel' for that robe to exist in the world. Judging from the fact that some time has passed since you've abandoned your last vessel, it probably means that not just anyone is good. You probably choose only people who fulfill certain conditions as vessels. And when you have a bad affinity with your vessel, or when you don't have a vessel at all, you're unable to stay long in this world."

The foul domain that Inuko should have already negated was quickly revived. As the bell kept ringing, even the miasma covering *Shinpu* was being restored.

As Inuko readied her hockey stick, beads of sweat gradually formed on the back of her neck.

"Anyway, it seems that just like you said your vessel this time is quite cozy..."

Could she even win with the amount of time she had left—

Such thoughts rose up to her mind. The enemy seemed to have acquired a strong power beyond her expectations.

Yet she tried encouraging and invigorating her weakening spirits.

The biggest enemy in a battle was despair. If one imagined themselves losing it would actually happen. And so the ones who could blow away that worst mental image would also be them.

Inuko needed to use her biggest attack to annihilate *Shinpu* without giving him any chance to recover.

Will my body be able to bear this attack... I don't need to think about that—
She had already died once as a warrior.

I'll aim for a simultaneous kill—

The warrior who resolved herself had no longer any doubts.

"Be destroyed along with me here, *Shinpu*."

Rotating the stick, she readied it. Inuko sublimated her ability to its absolute limits, causing the air around her to flicker. Purple lightning surged in the shape of a Chestnut Tiger Butterfly.

"...I shall bestow despair unto thee heading for ruin..."

Shinpu was also expanding the scope of his ability. The bell floating in the night sky echoed a broken sound.

"I have no intention to conceal mine power... The one to conceal me is the dirty organization thou belong to..."

"I also thought about that. Your true 'body' or whatever is probably somehow related to the Central Headquarters. I have no idea whether Vice Director Miguruma knows about it or not, though."

Inuko asserted firmly without any disturbance.

If she assumed what *Shinpu* had told her was true, it was consistent with recent events.

"Miguruma... That loathsome name... She is the one to fetter me both in the past and now..."

"...So she really is connected with this. That sly woman."

"My real body, although completely changed, exists even now... What lies before your eyes is naught but a single fragment..."

Unconcealed scorn was mixed with his hoarse voice.

"I understood even that. Taking advantage of the failure of the experiments or whatever taking place in Central Headquarters, you released your fragment.

—You have already told me this."

Even the enemy in front of her that held so much power was merely one part.

That truth was enough to make Inuko despair. There still existed enemies in this world that Inuko had no idea if she could beat or not.

Was there any meaning in throwing her life away—

Even such thoughts were brought out of her.

Yet Inuko couldn't hesitate anymore.

"The only thing your despair or whatever has given me is hope."

While building up her entire body's power, Inuko raised a smile full of confidence.

"If you have endless fragments why did you run away from me? Why are you so frantically searching for a vessel to exist? I already know the answer. —The number of your fragments or whatever is limited. Yes, they're like parts of your body."

Shinpu's silence affirmed Inuko's hypothesis.

"Your old fragment or whatever had been defeated by *Kakkou*. And right now I will destroy another one."

Inuko's raincoat danced as if fanned by the wind. The domain controlled by *Shinpu* was repulsed by the purple lightning overwhelming domain.

"I'll make a prediction. Even if another of your fragments appears next, another warrior will definitely destroy it. The next fragment will be also destroyed. That's because there're enough warriors to beat you living in this world."

"...!"

Although *Shinpu* acted as though he was a god, Inuko could clearly perceive his wave was disturbed.

"—So you're scared."

Inuko's figure left an afterimage as she teleported.

"Do remember the one to give you that fear was a mere 'human'."

Transformed into a spear made of lightning, Inuko pierced the caterpillar-covered earth.

The wall of caterpillars born from the sound of bells directly clashed with Inuko's hockey stick.

"GAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

Inuko howled.

Embedded with an enormous magnetic field, the stick blew away the swarming caterpillars.

The stick stabbed the top of *Shinpu's* head clad in a dark miasma. The clash of their abilities caused the miasma to rapidly vanish.

The single blow possessing all of Inuko's remaining power exposed the flesh-and-blood body hidden inside the robe.

"...! You're—"

That person smiled from within the annihilated robe.

It happened when Inuko's stick pierced through the robe and was about to touch that person's head.

"...My child thought that she could destroy me..."

Just before the robe that was *Shinpu's* fragment was annihilated, Inuko's body lost its strength.

She made a lonely smile.

If I had just a bit more time—

If my body could hold out for just a bit longer—

She should have been able to win.

But a battle had no "ifs". This was Inuko's limit.

"..."

She realized the cause for this by an unexpected feeling.

Her sense of taste.

The candy inside her mouth has melted.

—It was her deadline.

As Inuko had severed all contact with the SEPB, she had no spare candies.

"...My battle has been pathetic to the very end."

But even so, Inuko had no choice but to go ahead.

—*Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!*

She was the one to teach this to Shachito.

She thought that she could win if she was resolved for a simultaneous kill.

However, Inuko's body—was ruined even beyond what she herself had thought.

In front of Inuko's eyes, the robe that had lost its form was being restored as if rolling back a video.

"Ah, how sad."

A lone tear streamed on Inuko's cheek.

"You've been devoured by your own dream."

Shinpu's face hidden behind the robe was that of a person Inuko knew.

"I wasn't able to win against you because... I wanted to save you. Looking at you now my tears won't stop. Even my other self has lost."

The smiling person was covered once again in the dark miasma.

"Before thou humans can destroy me... I shall eat all of thee..."

"Guh—"

The swarm of caterpillars swallowed up Inuko.

While being bitten all over her body was thrown high up in the air, and she slammed into the ground with the remaining momentum.

"...GAH!"

Since Inuko couldn't use her ability, she fell on the asphalt without even any

falling technique. Even Inuko had a flesh-and-blood body. The impact made all of her bones raise a nasty sound.

"This vessel shall eat the dreams of countless people, transforming them into my flesh..."

Inuko's consciousness was rapidly fading away.

"I shall accumulate power... I await the moment when the king shall welcome me..."

It was as if he said there was no point to eat the remnants of her heart.

Not even looking back to the collapsed Inuko, *Shinpu's* presence was growing distant.

"...Hey, my other self. Listen to me."

At the same time—

"I'm different from you. I haven't lost yet—"

Inuko's sensing ability perceived the approach of another wave.

5.02 Shachito Part 8

Still collapsed in the empty alley, Shachito didn't feel like even moving a single finger.

Only time was passing, and it became night at some point.

No matter how much he searched for her, he couldn't find Shishidou Inuko anywhere. Her cellphone was also blocked.

He had been abandoned.

As this truth permeated him, he stopped caring about anything.

If he had to forget about his sinful dream and return to his broken self again he would rather die like this.

"I was able to live well until now..."

Harboring the worst dream, trying to share his pain and trying to destroy other people's dreams, he thought that he was able to live well knowing no shame.

Even so, he felt the current situation was painful.

He suffered.

He was getting his just desserts and yet he still sought salvation.

"Wanting to be saved by Inuko even now... I'm a helpless idiot."

He closed his eyes.

He tried thinking of reasons to keep living.

But he couldn't find any.

Unable to return to his previous life, he also failed in becoming a warrior.

"..."

He couldn't find any meaning in life—

When he noticed that, he lost the need to think.

His mind became empty.

—And inside his supposedly empty head he could perceive something.

"...?"

Shachito knit his brows. Although he was intending to bleed, freeze or starve to death, thanks to that unease his thinking didn't suspend.

He soon became able to feel the thing inside his mind with his entire body.

Increasingly becoming unable to stay still, he reluctantly opened his eyes.

"So annoying. What the heck is that..."

The pulse in his chest was quickening.

What Shachito felt was a horribly bad feeling. Yet it also felt nostalgic and reliably powerful.

—No, that wasn't all.

There were two sensations.

Something so creepy that it made him feel dread and something with a strong will were fighting.

"..."

Rousing the upper half of his body, he moved his gaze to the distance.

He could feel two kinds of powers in that direction.

These were special and abnormal force-fields, different from the usual.

"—Inuko?"

These words leaked out unconsciously. Hearing his own mutter, he finally understood the identity of that presence.

His body started moving of its own as if he had been blown away. Raising the collapsed motorbike, he revved up the engine again. He turned the throttle before even straddling it.

Flying into the national highway, he rode toward a certain location, following his mysterious feeling.

This force-field felt by Shachito—that power that possessed a certain life force, belonged to the girl he knew well, to Inuko. Tough and strong, it was an unbelievably large power.

On the other hand, he also realized the identity of the power near her.

Shinpu—

Fear was reborn in Shachito's heart.

"Haven't I defeated him...!"

Passing through the town center, Shachito kept pushing on straight ahead toward the location of the powers.

Why was he able to feel Inuko and *Shinpu*'s powers? He had some questions about that, but he felt much more fear at the two powers fighting violently.

So strong—

He could feel that *Shinpu*'s power swelled so much it was incomparable with their last fight.

Even Inuko, fighting against him, emitted a power much larger than Shachito had ever felt before.

Riding his So1o, Oranje Land appeared in front of Shachito. The closer he got there, the closer he got to the powers he could feel.

"...!"

For an instant, both powers got even stronger.

Immediately after, one of them rapidly shrank, vanishing.

The power gone—was Inuko's.

"Inuko...!"

Turning in the road, he headed for the spot where he'd felt Inuko's power. Using his Mushitsuki ability, he reduced the motorbike's mass and leapt over the fences.

The area lined up with windmills was ruined as if a bomb fell there.

"Inukooo!"

Finding Inuko's collapsed figure, he jumped off of his motorbike.

When he held up Inuko he could see her chest rising a little. Various spots on her raincoat were ripped away as if gnawed into, and she herself was bleeding horribly.

"Inukooo! Inukooo!"

As Shachito kept calling desperately to her, something small fell out of his pocket.

It was a lollipop he had been given by Inuko before. He never felt like trying to eat that mysterious candy, so he simply left it aside all this time.

The girl opened her eyes absentmindedly.

"...You've brought me something good, huh. I'm sorry, but I need it back."

Easily waking up and finding the lollipop, Inuko casually threw it into her mouth.

"—Now I'll be able to fight a bit more."

Although she was that tired and wounded, Inuko has yet to lost her will to fight— "How did you find me?"

She suddenly inquired, closing her eyes again.

"I-I don't really get it, but I had the feeling that you and *Shinpu* were here..."

"...So you also had a sensing ability... We're becoming more and more similar."

She took a deep breath. A cynical smile rose to her face.

"Even so, what have you come here to do?"

"I-I'm—"

He came there as though possessed, so even he himself didn't know why he was there.

He frantically searched for Inuko in order to be rescued by her. He was simply

unable to bear everything he'd done so far, as well as his dream.

He had thought Inuko would be able to save him.

However, now that she was in front of Shachito—he saw that she was far too weak, and not in any state to offer help to him.

"—Sorry."

He was much too pitiful. He buried his face in Inuko's chest, his shoulders shaking.

"I wasn't... able to become a warrior."

Perhaps he would find meaning in life if he could dedicate himself to fighting. If he became as strong as Inuko he would probably be able to save many people.

But Shachito couldn't fight.

He couldn't even turn to face *Shinpu's* wave he felt at his back. He could only shudder.

"...The right pocket of my raincoat. I'll give you what's in there."

Inuko said in a calm voice.

Although puzzled, Shachito raised his face and did as he was told. Feeling inside the pocket that seemed like it would tear apart any moment, he pulled out a card.

"This is my secret stash. Since it's under a fictional name it should be hard to trace. The PIN is written on the card."

"...?"

"I also have two things I need to apologize to you about. First is for when I tried to kill Masaki Rio. I was actually serious there. I thought that if you hadn't showed up it would be fine eliminating her."

Shachito widened his eyes. Recalling something, he turned back.

—Tonight's the premiere. Will you not come watch it?

Thus Rio had written in the mail she sent him. He finally realized why people

were gathering in the Concertgebouw.

And the Concertgebouw was definitely on *Shinpu*'s route.

Rio was also there—

Inuko continued with both eyes closed shut.

"The other thing is breaking our promise. I hinted about your existence to the SEPB. They will probably hold a large-scale search in this city before long."

"Search...?"

"Get away from this city, Shachito. You should be able to survive for the time being with that money. Until things calm down, do leave Holland City. Since you have sensing abilities, you might be able to slip through your pursuers' search."

"..."

Even hearing Inuko's confession, Shachito felt nothing. He had already lost all worth of living. Being pursued by someone from somewhere was no problem. He had nothing left to do in this city where he had destroyed many things.

"What will you do... Inuko?"

"Me? I'm finished."

The girl sighed again in Shachito's arms.

"Being unable to live as a warrior is unbearably painful. My failure in raising you is sad enough to make me cry. It's a pity I won't be able to watch the work of my disciples. I'm anxious whether I'll be able to keep my promise with a certain someone or not. I've effectively breached the rules and so I'm scared of receiving a punishment from the SEPB. Losing to *Shinpu* in the end was so vexing it tore my body apart."

A small current of lightning surged through Inuko's raincoat. She showed a smile.

"—And so I'll fight."

The eccentric traveller known as Shishidou Inuko was a warrior through and through. Although she was wounded and unable to move her body, she only thought of fighting.

"I see."

Shachito gently lowered her to the ground.

"So, this is goodbye then."

Inuko said Shachito resembled her, but that was wrong. Shachito was not as strong as her and he didn't have the will to fight.

Looking at the faraway visible city of Holland, he recalled.

He had nothing left to do?

That was untrue.

He had just one thing. Once he took care of that, he could leave the city at any time.

"Yeah, goodbye. Do be careful."



"I'll probably manage somehow. I'm already used to running away from persistent Mushitsuki."

He would conceal his pitifulness with a casual tone, not think of anything and run away from things that could hurt him.

This was how Shiohara Shachito was in both present and past.

Suddenly thinking of something, he rushed back to where the collapsed Inuko was. He leaned, bringing his face closer to hers.

He was the worst human after all. He wasn't going to check her complexion at so late a stage. There was no fear for any counterattack now.

The pair's lips touched for a split instant.

"Nice, naughty act accomplished. You won't punish me for just this much."

"...I'll fucking kill you. Do be gone already."

Running away from Inuko's demonic gaze, Shachito roused his motorbike.

As he revved up the engine, he could hear a sigh he was already used to.

"You were, to the very end, a completely not serious and hopeless student."

"And you were, to the very end, really cool."

He rode ahead, biting his lips.

"...I wasn't able to become like you."

Below the windmills lined up in Oranje Land, the two berserkers said their farewells.

5.03 The Others

The Concertgebouw was filled with a great number of spectators.

The clamor of the people awaiting the curtain rising was heard all the way through the passage where only authorized personnel could pass to the actors' waiting room.

A person clad in a black robe was walking through that passage.

The robe owner put their hand on a large door.

They slowly pushed it open.

Inside was a vast waiting room. All of the actors were already wearing their costumes, nervous. Some were checking the props, some were reviewing their scripts, and some practiced speaking against the walls. All of them were focusing in preparation for their own part.

"Masaki!"

Being addressed, the person in the robe—Masaki Rio, turned around. She lowered her hood.

"Where have you been! Don't just disappear like that only because your turn is later!"

Receiving the scolding, Rio who was already costumed nodded expressionlessly.

"I'm sorry. I just relaxed outside."

Rio played the part of the younger sister of the protagonist nurse. The story went such that she, a Sister at a monastery, was confused for her older sister who allowed the Beast, an enemy soldier, to escape, and so was seized by the military.

"You've passed at Harissi-san's recommendation. If you make any mistakes

now you'll make him lose face!"

"...Right."

Although the staff member dispensed with Rio, he was still restless and looked depressed.

"Still, having Harissi-san not appear even during the grand opening... where on earth has he gone to?"

"..."

Quite a few days passed ever since the play's advisor, Jarre Harissi, vanished from the theatrical company. The staff members and actors were perplexed, but as they were pressed for time by the busy work needed for the opening of the play, they eventually ended up barely even mentioning his name.

Rio left the staff member and headed to her locker. She returned the cellphone she had stealthily hidden inside her robe into the locker.

She checked the LCD screen one final time.

There were 0 emails.

In the end, the reply she had been waiting for never came.

"..."

She tightened her lips.

The fact I passed isn't luck at all— She told herself once again.

Wanting Shachito to believe in that, she had sent him an email. But not receiving a reply from him probably meant that he had already forgotten all about her.

"I'm—"

Just as Rio's feeling were about to reach their peak, a black mist started drifting inside the waiting room.

It was foul presence.

It was miasma that twisted people's hearts.

As Rio cast her gaze down, she could hear the sound of a bell.

It was a horribly ear-grating, cracked metallic sound that seemed to dirty up the very air.

Rio grimaced.

Although she hadn't heard it at all lately, the bell sound audible only for her was back.

"..."

Rio widened her eyes.

No, it was different from before.

Previously she should have heard it in her ears.

But this sound was—

Widening her eyes, Rio turned around.

The staff members and actors all raised cries of joy. They all rushed to a certain spot.

"No—way—"

Rio's face paled.

The bell sound wasn't heard from next to her.

She heard it coming from around a certain person who was smiling while surrounded by the staff members. Above his head, taller than anyone there, she had the feeling she could see something resembling black fog.

Unlike Rio who was only wearing a costume, a robe made of bizarre miasma was being materialized on him.

He was Jarre Harissi.

This man, with a smile on his bear-like face and encouraging the staff members around him, was someone who couldn't possibly be there.

Rio had seen it for certain.

On the backside of that building she saw—his corpse *after he jumped off the roof*.

Rio immediately ran away, but his death never made it to the news. The staff

and the company also never knew of his death, and in the meanwhile continued their preparations for the grand opening like normal.

Why had she faced such a scene?

Where had the corpse even gone to?

She tried forgetting about Jarre just like all the people around her.

"But—How—"

Seeing the pale Rio, Jarre wore a smile.

"Come now, it's showtime. Aren't you going to show everyone our great performance?"

The filthy robe that only Rio could see alighted down to Jarre's giant body.

5.04 The Others

It happened during the few days of preparation before the grand opening.

Jarre Harissi was inside the building where the audition had taken place.

He climbed up the silent stairway with a heavy gait.

"Masaki Rio has conquered you. You have lost to Masaki Rio..."

A formless voice kept whispering into Jarre's ears. It was like this ever since the final audition and his joint performance against Masaki Rio.

Masaki Rio, desperately struggling while lacking belief in her own talent and possibilities, was supposed to overlap with the figure of his past self. However, with his rational thinking lost due to the influence of a mysterious miasma, Jarre had attempted to trample over her dream.

Yet he had lost.

Masaki Rio had brushed aside his acting, accomplishing her own.

"Ugh..."

Jarre was climbing the stairs.

Having Rio pass was obvious. He had found acting that outdid even a pro like himself. Her talent was immeasurable, and she would keep polishing her skills from now on.

On the other hand, Jarre ended up feeling despair at his own age as a result.

"Thou art a pitiful loser..."

The creepy, hoarse voice kept blaming Jarre even now.

"I'm a pitiful loser..."

He had been betrayed by what he always found important.

Watching over Jarre ever since he was small, at times spouting cruel words, at times becoming his strength. It was the only thing he wished to improve.

It was always nearby—Jarre's dream.

Every time his talent and his possibilities were being tested, the one to appear next to him and try to discourage him was his other self.

Will it go well?

Ah, it's already useless.

No, I can still do it—

Every time he faced his dream, he would ask and derive answers out of himself as if standing in front of a mirror.

Even though Jarre retired from active work, he couldn't throw away his dream.

"Thou hast lost... And therefore do I need thee."

Jarre widened his eyes.

"In this city there were two people fit to become mine vessels... And therefore I have come here."

As if being controlled by someone, Jarre reached the highest floor.

Opening the door at the end of the stairway, the unceasing rain filled his vision.

"One has a dream tinged with lingering attachments, ripe and mature... The other flutters between a sparkling dream and pitch-black despair... And therefore I have chosen thee..."

A cracked metallic sound could be heard from somewhere.

To the current Jarre, who had lost to the girl overflowing with possibilities, it sounded so sweet he felt a shiver. With every ring the air became fouler and he breathed it into his lungs.

Jarre stepped ahead, exiting into the raining rooftop.

"Ahhh..."

Staggering ahead while walking, a black miasma gathered around Jarre. It slowly took form, changing into a filthy robe.

Jarre grabbed the fences and pulled. They were ripped from their bases with a crushing sound.

"Uh—"

Looking far down at the person below, Jarre's face twisted in fear.

It was Masaki Rio. He wondered why she was there—perhaps the being that whispered to him had called her there.

The sound of a bell echoed from overhead.

"Thy ruined despair is as great as the luster of thy dream... Yet that woman has beaten thee. She is not yet fit to become mine vessel..."

The hoarse voice whispered.

"Thou can show it to her, the girl that has beaten thee... Show her what happens at the conclusion of being pursued by thy dream for decades; show her thy broken and pathetic figure..."

Jarre widened his eyes.

It was just like the formless voice said. Jarre pursued his dream and once achieved glory. Yet this honor was short-lived, and he started struggling in order to retrieve his shining days.

Months and years went by fast.

Before he noticed, Jarre started wondering whether this past glory came only due to luck.

Doubting his own talent, Jarre became increasingly pitiful. Perhaps flying around the world and coming in contact with young talent was an attempt for him to recall the passion of his bygone days.

But in fact—

"But were you not, in fact, envious?"

There was a part of him that felt jealousy towards those children that had what he lacked.

Jarre's expression was changing. Hatred toward these young talents, as well as towards the world that didn't acknowledge him, was swelling inside him.

"Show her... Although she shines now, one day her dream shall be shattered and she shall become as pitiful as thee..."

With his expression warped by this ugly feeling, Jarre stepped off the rooftop and into air.

There was a sudden sense of falling.

"I have chosen thee..."

The voice became different, inhuman.

"It is the loser, with his dream broken and drowned in envy and wrath, which I do desire as mine vessel."

While falling down Holland City, Jarre was filled by a sense of liberation.

"Thou art the one fit to become mine vessel..."

I see, so I lost to myself—

To his dream.

To the beautiful yet harsh world.

Somewhere in his heart controlled by deep despair, he could feel a sense of relief with no suffering.

—Jarre Harissi had lost his life, changing into the vessel of *Shinpu*, but a small part of his ego remained.

During the time his body was restored enough to operate, it had mostly been taken over by his hatred toward the world and *Shinpu*'s consciousness.

Even while he was moving from the city toward Oranje Land.

Even while he was fighting against the warrior who could control magnetism.

The small vestiges of Jarre Harris's consciousness remained inside the lifeless vessel.

After encouraging the theater staff in Oranje Land's waiting room, Jarre walked towards the locker area.

"Ah—Ah—"

A small girl was there, becoming pale upon seeing his face.

Masaki Rio.

She should have lost her peace of mind ever since Jarre had shown her the moment of his death.

It was natural. The unsightly form of Jarre back then was to become Rio's future.

"Thou cannot escape my whispering any longer..."

As Jarre wore a malicious smile, *Shinpu* spoke toward Rio from overhead.

Shinpu's will was transmitted to Jarre through his body.

Masaki Rio could be called his spare vessel. Letting her see Jarre's death was only a binding spell placed on her by *Shinpu*.

By suggesting this was her future, he told Rio that before she noticed there would come a time when, just like Jarre, she would lose all hope in her dream—
"If I were to lose this vessel, I shall come for thee again..."

Only Jarre and Rio could hear the reverberating bell sounds and the hoarse voice.

This was no blessing.

This was the fate of someone who received a "curse". A whisper one couldn't escape from.

"Uuhhh..."

Rio's face drained of all blood as if she were sick.

It was a great sight. She should no longer be able to act properly during tonight's performance.

No, today's show would not succeed regardless.

"Only thy heart I shall not devour today... For now, at least..."

Jarre turned his back to Rio, walking away.

The people gathering in the Concertgebouw have invited *Shinpu*.

Jarre's body seemed to have great affinity with *Shinpu*. Since he was overflowing with power now, he should be able to devour everyone's hearts for his nourishment.

"Jarre—san—"

The girl probably voiced this without intending to. Rio called Jarre's name.

Jarre's consciousness, on the verge of fusing with *Shinpu*, reared its head.

"..."

He turned around with stiff movements.

It was like a flash of light—he saw his past self overlapping with Rio.

The young Jarre had found a dream and pursued his ideals single-mindedly. Even he shuddered and trembled just like Rio did just now. He felt anxious at his own talent, wandering in the boundary between hope and despair.

Scenes of the life he had led rose to his mind one after another.

At times he succeeded and at times he failed.

But he had no regrets.

His way of living while fighting his dream single-mindedly belonged to none other than himself.

"Please—"

As Jarre came in contact with children that had a promising future, he certainly felt jealous.

But it wasn't all.

There was also a hope shining with dreams.

He was, without any doubt, a scout, and so guiding them was his *raison d'être*.

Rio as well should have been one of his students.

"Continue believing in yourself."

He showed her a gentle smile.

This was Jarre's first and last teaching.

Even if her dream was ruined, even if she would be encroached by her own despair— She would never lose what she gained by imagining her dream.

"...Huh?"

Rio asked back with an astonished face.

But this was the last resistance of the personality known as Jarre Harissi.

By the time he turned his back to her again, his expression had changed to that of *Shinpu*.

As Jarre exited the waiting room and went into the corridor, life was gone from his eyes and the miasma converged around him. It became a filthy robe, cloaking the man's large body.

The man's body swelled beneath the robe. It became thicker as if bursting from the inside. The caterpillars that moved his body squirmed under his inflamed skin.

Scraping his hooded head on the ceiling, he arrived at the emergency exit so he could search for an audience seat.

The body of the man that used to be known as Jarre Harissi perfectly became *Shinpu*'s.

"Now then, it is time to feast... on these mortals—"

The numbers of people assembled in the Concertgebouw added up to several thousands. Among the people filling all the seats there were also many adolescent boys and girls. Looking forward to the grand opening, all of them had sparkling expressions.

The large body wrapped in a robe shook at the sweet scent of their dreams that nearly made him choke.

"I shall satiate mine hunger...!"

And thus *Shinpu*—no, Diorestoi's fragment raised a joyous roar.

The sweeping miasma swallowed the audience.

The cracked sound of a bell reverberated throughout the whole stage.

Sounds overlapped, extended and grew louder.

They increased.

Sound called for sound, filling the Concertgebouw with foul sounds.

The images of a "Church" were materializing one after another above the heads of the boys and girl sitting in the audience.

From small to big, over a thousand "Churches" were filling the tall ceiling.

Being pulled in by the domain of Churches, the children's expressions became blurred as if they melted— "Khaaa...!"

Diorestoi's fragment opened its mouth wide in ecstasy.

Unlike the other Original Three—Diorestoi had the ability to eat countless of dreams all at the same time. Just as he could possess several bodies, Diorestoi could only produce an amount of "Churches" equivalent to the number of dreams.

His fragments until now could only eat one person's dream at a time, but now that he gained the compatible body of Jarre Harissi, his fragment became powerful enough to swallow up the entire Concertgebouw.

The dreams eaten by the fragment would sustain the flesh and blood of his main body far away. If he kept eating dreams using this powerful vessel, when his main body was released it would probably eventually become able to swallow the entire country—



The other audience members, noticing the abnormality, started stirring. Among them were also those with strong spiritual powers, apparently able to see the "Churches". They pointed at the ceiling and clamored.

The dreams flowing in through the "Churches" were about to flow inside Diorestoi's opened mouth— "...!"

The bell sounds became blurred.

The countless images of the "Churches" were being nullified.

The humans who have escaped the powers of Diorestoi tilted their heads quizzically. He had only managed to activate his ability for an instant, so he was unable to eat even a single person's dream.

A powerful and different power offset Diorestoi's domain.

"Who art thou...!"

Averting his eyes from the audience that wondered if this was part of the performance, he turned toward the corridor at his back.

A powerful presence was approaching at dreadful speed.

Rushing through the corridor, it was drawing near in the speed of an arrow.

The owner of that power finally pressed near Diorestoi.

"OOOOH...!"

The strong power sent Diorestoi flying. Something grabbed him at high speeds, pushing him further into the dark passage.

"Curses...!"

The swarm of caterpillars opposed the one resenting them.

Yet the enemy's power was terrific.

Blowing away the caterpillars, Diorestoi's body, forcibly flung away, stabbed through the door of the emergency exit. He crashed into the ground, cracking the asphalt behind the Concertgebouw.

Further attacks assaulted him.

A fierce blow struck Diorestoi's chest. As he was pounded against the ground

and rebounded, his opponent teleported in pursuit to stab him.

"OOOH...OOH!"

Diorestoi's big frame was flung afar just like a bullet. Stabbing through a windmill he crashed into, he was blown several hundred meters away.

His opponent was apparently attempting to change the battlefield from the Concertgebouw. As Diorestoi broke through the fences of Oranje Land, his opponent had already anticipated his arrival there, teleporting for another attack.

Knocking down trees, crushing the road, Diorestoi's body was helplessly exiled from the premises of Oranje Land.

"GWAAAAAAAAAH!"

His opponent raised a roar.

As Diorestoi was kicked up high, further attacks knocked him away. Scattering the miasma, Diorestoi crashed—on top of the roof of the all-weather dome.

"—So thou still plan on standing in my way...!"

Diorestoi's momentum crashing into the vast dome's roof caused a part of it to cave in.

His mad miasma produced a "Church" in the night sky. The curved dome roof transformed into a swarm of caterpillars.

This way of fighting...

This beastlike roar and fighting spirit...

This awesome power unworthy of humans that pressured him...

All of them were exactly the same as those of the opponent he had supposedly defeated by his own hands earlier.

"Thou girl who calls herself a warrior...!"

Diorestoi used Jarre's face to glare at the person landing on the ground.

"Hihah."

Yet his opponent had not beastlike eyes, but a broken smile; he was not a girl,

but a boy.

"Who's a girl? You seem to be mistaking me with some raincoat freak."

The boy declared this mistake, yet his expression was fit to carry the name of a berserker.

Shiohara Shachito's "final test".

Its form was a "supplementary lesson".

—Start.

5.05 Shachito Part 9

There was only one thing he had left undone in this city.

There remained only one dream that Shachito had met and not destroyed yet.

—*Tonight's the premiere. Will you not come watch it?*

Masaki Rio.

He had already noticed the fact he had gotten closer to that girl not because of any special feelings.

It came from foolish self-satisfaction and an impulse for destruction—just as he did until now, without thinking of anything and simply following his desires, he intervened in Rio's affairs and was about to grow tired of her and forget her.

There were no feelings of love.

Rio wasn't special.

—Therefore, there was only one different thing now.

Rio's dream still continued even now—

He didn't think he could atone for his sins.

He didn't think his dream could be forgiven.

Yet he knew that he had nothing, and when Shachito thought about what he should be doing, only one course of action rose to mind.

It was "fighting".

Inuko's eyes were correct in a certain sense.

No matter how weak he was, no matter how much of a coward he was, Shachito ended up arriving on the battlefield.

Could you call even a Mushitsuki scared of being hurt a warrior?

"It's somewhat weird."

Still wearing a broken smile, Shachito mumbled in a light tone.

"Inuko told me... She said that I shouldn't think of myself as another person. —There are Inuko, me, and you in one city... and probably Rio-chan, too. Anyway, there are two sets of a teacher and student."

He wasn't speaking with *Shinpu*.

He just thought it was weird from the bottom of his heart.

What had these bizarre, fateful meetings brought forth for these four people including himself?

"Inuko was defeated by you, and you've also lost to *Shinpu*. And so the only ones left are us the two students. Rio-chan is also probably fighting right about now. —Since I just went with the flow and lived irresponsibly like a playboy until you, there's definitely no way I'll be the only one not fighting."

Saying this, he wore a broken smile.

"Hihah."

Surrounded by the caterpillars, Shachito's body emitted an orange glow. The domain of his ability to control force-fields crushed the caterpillars squirming around. The dome's rooftop controlled by *Shinpu* was swallowed up by Shachito's domain in a round pattern.

The roof had probably crumbled due to the previous impact. A shrill alarm was ringing. He could see many people rushing out from the entrance below his eyes to seek shelter.

The large rooftop of the all-weather dome looked like a curved field. Illuminated by the lights installed here and there and the diodes adorning the edges, the caterpillars spread all over the surface shone in multicolor.

On top of the inclined roof was an antenna device, its large needle piercing the sky. There were also electrical boxes that seemed like communication devices and solar panels.

As far as Shachito could see, although obvious, only he and *Shinpu* were there. Shachito had no weapon or any other special tool for fighting.

Shinpu, meanwhile, wore the exact same filthy robe from the last time they fought. Yet he appeared to change his body, as he was now a towering giant. The earlier attack had diluted the miasma around him, and so his bear-like face hidden under the hood was revealed.

He was Jarre Harissi.

Shachito knew that name from an advertisement about the show taking place in the Concertgebouw.

"Sorry for bothering you while you're being possessed by *Shinpu*, but can I ask you something, Jarre-san?"

He raised his voice in a casual tone.

A lone caterpillar crawled up from inside Jarre's mouth under the robe. Shachito could also see something squirming under his skin even from afar.

"No matter how I look at it, you're dead, right?"

He had already heard Inuko's reasoning about the fragments and their abilities during their training. As expected, her conjectures were right on the mark.

"...The death of a person whose dream was ruined is a condition to become suitable as mine vessel..."

An evil smile rose to Jarre's face. Although his mouth wasn't moving, a hoarse voice could be heard from somewhere. The image of a church floating in the night sky rang the sounds of a bell that shook the air and eardrums.

"Wow, spooky. But y'know, when I saw you on TV you looked normal. You seem to have become quite strong and there's no way such a suitable human would die so conveniently."

When fighting an unknown enemy, he had to kick his mind into full gear in order to see through their characteristics.

Although he was branded as a failed warrior, Inuko's teachings firmly took root in him.

"You killed Jarre, right?"

Shinpu's wicked smile and Shachito's broken smile intersected. Autumn Darters took flight from Shachito's right hand to his left and from his left foot to his right shoulder.

"You can even control living humans to some degree. But you probably need to have your vessel die in order to use your Mushi-birthing abilities as *Shinpu*. You're really into necrophilia, huh? And since you need broken dreams or the like, you can only kill weak people, right?"

What Shachito pointed out seemed to be right on the mark. *Shinpu*'s smile deepened.

"Mine true power is different... I have no intention of imitating Aria Vareii..."

"Aria? What's that?"

"There are countless vessels... Even if thou destroy this vessel here, there will be another suitable one nearby..."

"Hellooo, am I being ignored? Wait, who's that other vessel?"

Although talking lightly, he was shaken on the inside.

There being another vessel meant that just like before, once he drove this fragment out of the vessel it would revive again. Meaning it was essential to completely destroy the caterpillars making up his real body.

"Masaki Rio."

The giant man in Jarre's form mouthed her name in an unfittingly bold tone.

For an instant Shachito was speechless.

Thinking about it there were some points of similarity. Although she was normally really cheerful, there were times occasionally where she would feel overly anxious and get carried away.

"...That girl as well is about to yield her dream... Even if she is able to withstand my whispering for now, the time for her dream to be ruined shall come without fail..."

Shachito's agitation caused the domain protecting him to shake. In an instant *Shinpu*'s miasma began invading the orange-colored circle.

"...Oh, so it's Rio-chan? By the way you're acting it seems like you already knew she's my acquaintance. Meaning, you've been approaching her for quite a while."

He probably only followed Rio around so that he could break her dream and make her despair.

The very same thing that Shachito himself tried doing.

He could feel an inappropriate sense of affinity.

He gritted his teeth to stifle his smile.

While Shachito was running away from his own dream, he became the same as this monster— "—Be gone."

With a tap, Shachito's legs kicked the roof.

The swarm of caterpillars was shredded in a straight line. Being blown away by the teleporting Shachito, the torn caterpillars danced in the air.

"Both of us can't be allowed near Rio-chan."

From a position far from *Shinpu*, he grabbed the floor and stopped. Escaping from *Shinpu*'s domain, he released his ability in full power.

This battle would probably become something that couldn't even count as a battle.

Before he was wounded by the battle—before receiving any counterattack, Shachito would choke the life of *Shinpu* and annihilate him.

"Hihah!"

An Autumn Darter flew out of Shachito. Raising his initial velocity while his weight was zero, he retrieved the Autumn Darter immediately afterwards to obtain speed like that of a rifle bullet. Shachito transferred not only his original weight; he also took in the mass of the panels around the roof and further amplified it.

Clad in an orange glow, Shachito burst apart the wall of caterpillars welling in front of him.

He pursued *Shinpu* while housing this tremendous mass.

However—

"Foolish... Although thou are my child, I shall not be merciful...!"

He was probably used to super speed after fighting with Inuko. *Shinpu* raised his arm and it swelled like a balloon. Its skin ripping apart, the arm that grew to be as thick as a tree pounded Shachito's head.

"...Hihah."

As *Shinpu*'s fist connected with Shachito's face, a smile rose to it.

An Autumn Darter had already flown out of *Shinpu*'s body at the moment of impact. The blow, having lost all of its mass, felt like being hit by silk. There was no pain.

On the other hand, Shachito's fist containing a super mass caught *Shinpu*'s chin. The miasma enclosing him was blown apart, throwing the robe-clad giant body in the air.

The sound of a bell reverberated.

The spirit-gnawing miasma surrounded Shachito.

"RAAAAHHH!!!"

Yet without minding it, he leapt aiming at *Shinpu*. While airborne he put his hand to *Shinpu*'s thick neck, amplifying his weight and hurling him toward the rooftop.

Relentless alarm sounds again echoed from the dome.

The impact of *Shinpu*'s fall greatly distorted the panels, and a tremor was transmitted to the whole dome.

As *Shinpu* was pounded into the roof, caterpillar corpses spilled out of his hood. A part of the robe made of miasma blurred and vanished.

He had definitely received some damage, but although this impact would have decimated a normal person he only lost a part of him. As Shachito found it hard to believe Inuko inflicted no damage on him, it wasn't difficult to surmise that the fragment's real body possessed regenerative abilities.

Should he pile on damage without giving him time to regenerate or finish

everything with an overwhelming, single slow? There appeared to be no other options.

The bell sounds grew louder.

The effective range of Shachito's ability was being encroached by the miasma. His heart was being rapidly worn down.

"Was it called hit and run? Or is the situation here more like offense is the best defense?"

He recalled Inuko's teachings, but since he lacked experience Shachito couldn't decide.

But it didn't matter.

Since he was originally frivolous, there was not even a single time where he acted according to Inuko's instructions.

"Hihah."

Teleporting to *Shinpu*, he thrust his hand inside his hood. Grabbing Jarre's bear-like face, he raised him up using his ability.

"Break."

Pounding *Shinpu* on the roof blew away all the panels he could see.

Raising him up after he got stuck in the drainage, Shachito thrust him in the opposite direction.

"Hihah."

Every time Shachito struck the roof, the robe covering Jarre's body would be worn down. Its scraps, transformed into caterpillar corpses, were spilling to his feet.

A thick arm tried grabbing Shachito's face back.

"I shall destroy thee, my child...!"

Instantly transmitting through the filthy robe, the dark miasma covered Shachito.

His field of vision shook violently.

Probably seeing that a physical attack would be ineffective, he was trying to swallow Shachito's mind with emptiness.

"Hihah. What's that?"

Even as his consciousness was being muddled, Shachito didn't let go of *Shinpu*. Entering a sort of a trance during battle was another similarity between him and Inuko.

Even if his mind was encroached, his excited body would attack the opponent of its own accord.

Although he was losing the light in his eyes, Shachito never ceased pounding *Shinpu* on the roof.

"Hihahah!"

The filthy robe was being ripped apart and the amount of caterpillar corpses increased. Jarre's expression, hidden by the hood, was twisted in pain for the first time.

But as Shachito tried repeating the attack again, he felt some discomfort on his neck.

"...Ah?"

Something clung to his nape. He felt around his neck with his free hand, finding a white caterpillar in his hand that left a small stinging behind.

It was apparently one of the caterpillars forming the robe. Its body was torn apart and it shed a dirty-looking fluid.

Yet attached to its fanged mouthpart—was undoubtedly red blood.

Inside Shachito's hand, the dying caterpillar turned into smoke and vanished.

"Ouch..."

He pressed on his neck.

A tiny laceration at about the level of a scratch was engraved there.

But the dull "pain" made Shachito come back to his senses. His smile vanished and his face distorted in fear.

"It hurts..."

His concentration gone, he recalled the period of his hospitalization.

He felt as if that hell-like pain would be reborn any second now— "...!"

As he slackened his attack, *Shinpu*'s robe started regenerating.

The swarm of caterpillars crawled up the thick arm that grabbed Shachito's hand back, swallowing him.

"UAAAAAAAAAHHH!"

The fearful Shachito had no more mental power left to withstand the surging miasma and caterpillars.

His ego was robbed away as if being swallowed.

He seemed to be losing even his sanity as the pain ran through his entire body.

And when his fear reached its absolute limits—

—The sound of a bell echoed.

The sound of a bell was echoing.

"..."

Shachito stood dazed in front of a decaying church.

The wild earth around spread in all direction, and in the sky not even the sun or moonlight could be seen.

Standing on the decayed land were Shachito and the church, as well a single tall tree. There was nothing else. His sensations perhaps dulled, he had a bizarre feeling of floating. Even his sense of up and down was in danger.

A bell rang.

A rusted bell was hanging on the broken church roof. Every time it shook a cracked metallic sound echoed from it. And as that sound echoed, he realized the air around was growing polluted.

The sticky air robbed Shachito's rational thinking.

He couldn't recall why he was standing in such a place.

"This is—"

He recalled.

He had come to this place once before.

When had that happened?

"Thou have embraced thy dream here..."

He could hear a hoarse voice from somewhere.

Shachito absentmindedly raised his face. Looking for the voice's owner, he set foot inside the church.

Even inside, where there were lines of broken wood tables, there were no traces of any human.

There was also nothing inside the church. There were neither any crosses nor statues. It was empty.

"Thou have imagined an unforgivable dream..."

He lost strength in both legs and slumped to his knees.

Yes, Shachito had once mouthed his dream here.

—I want everyone, not just me, to suffer.

Unable to bear the pain from his injuries, Shachito hated the world.

Unwilling to acknowledge this, Shachito kept denying his status as a Mushitsuki. And as he concealed his dream, he secretly twisted and broke at some point.

He forgot about pain, but when trying to recall it, he desired seeing other people get hurt.

"I..."

A lone tear spilled from Shachito's blank pupils.

He was reminded of the faces of the countless people he had hurt this far.

Finding people with shining dreams, Shachito broke them and saw them get hurt. However, as he himself had forgotten pain he couldn't understand other people's pain, and so reached out to yet another person.

"I'll never be forgiven..."

Something important was spilling out of his heart.

Shachito collapsed headlong on the floor with a clang.

—*This is Shinpu's domain. Keep a firm hold on your consciousness.*

Shachito could hear a warning inside him. This was the only strong part remaining inside his weak body. The impulse born from being trained as a warrior by Shishidou Inuko urged him.

Yet Shachito could fight no longer.

He slowly closed his eyes.

There was no reason for him to be alive and he had no goal.

His dream as a Mushitsuki was nothing but a helpless, dirty curse.

"I'm just... meaningless..."

The slight remains of resistance inside Shachito vanished.

His vision was closing.

Inside his closing view he could see a light smashing the decaying church.

Shachito widened his eyes at the blinding scene without thinking.

The bell sounds stopped—

—The bell sounds have stopped.

"I'll forgive you."

Coming back to, Shachito saw the smile of a girl shrouded in electricity.

The warm and powerful wave of power woke him up.

Shinpu's hand grabbing Shachito was torn from the elbow. What cut it off was a hockey stick emitting an intense magnetic field.

"I'll forgive your dream."

Shishidou Inuko had cut in between Shachito and Shinpu. The single blow of her hockey stick sent *Shinpu's* large body flying far away.

Inuko's back obstructed his eyes as if she was trying to protect him after he

tumbled on the rooftop.

The smile of the girl told him everything.

—*You were, to the very end, a completely not serious and hopeless student.*

These words were the command to run away, convinced that Shachito wouldn't follow them.

This great warrior had known from the start that Shachito would return to the battlefield.

"You once asked me... what my dream was."

The girl rotated her stick once, unleashing a storm of magnetism. The caterpillars biting Shachito's body all over returned being black fog and vanished.

"It was the sort of incident that happens a lot... a robber murdered an entire family. When my young self saw my family ripped to shreds in front of my eyes, I ended up thoughtlessly wishing for it."

Her back was slightly shaking. Although she was also fatigued, she kept repelling *Shinpu*'s domain in order to buy time for Shachito to recover his stamina.

"People who do such horrible things should all go to hell—is what I thought."

Shachito gulped.

She was the same as him.

It was a negative dream, lacking any kind of hope.

"Does it hurt, Shachito? Are you scared? Are you anxious? Sad? Is it tough for you? Don't you know what you're supposed to do? —I already taught you what to do at such times."

Shachito grimaced. His bitten body hurt all over.

—*Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!*

Inuko had once taught him this.



But the pain brought forth his fears from the past.

"Don't be afraid of pain. It's the proof you're alive. You're alive because you can feel pain. Everyone's dreams are interconnected. You're living not just for your own dream."

The bell sounds once again shook the surrounding air.

In front of the two berserkers an even bigger mass of miasma rose up. Caterpillars crawling up *Shinpu*'s legs restored his severed arm.

"I also despaired when I recalled my dream. I wondered if there was any point to my life in order to protect a dream like that. I tried finding some meaning on the battlefield, but that also bore no fruits. Yet I've been given a duty. —Which is raising warriors like you."

Inuko turned around half of her face to look at him. It was a smile so kind one couldn't think she was currently facing a powerful enemy.

"I wasn't able to become the strongest warrior. So if you remain alive and become stronger—it would mean that my life had meaning."

Turning her back once again, Inuko's body was wrapped in purple lightning.

"Everyone's a warrior as long as they're alive. And a warrior has no enemy they can't fight."

In front of the paralyzed Shachito, a battle made by the best warrior began.

Invoking her ability with her full powers, Inuko's strength was terrifying. She leapt around the dome's roof at several times Shachito's speed, and every time her purple electricity flashed, *Shinpu*'s miasma would be blown away.

Brushing aside *Shinpu*'s attacks, she slashed his giant body with a swipe. She repeated her slashes with refined movements, not even one of them wasted. Immediately afterwards, the violent destructive power smashed *Shinpu*'s body.

At some point, Inuko had said that there was a warrior stronger than her.

Yet as Shachito, paralyzed with fear, watched the girl's vivid fighting unfolding in front of him, he could think of only her as the strongest warrior.

Shachito burned the sight of Shishidou Inuko's battle into his eyes.

The ideal form of a warrior was in front of him.

"Inu—"

As Shachito gazed the battle, his eyes clearly reflected that sight.

Causing a dry voice, the bloody hockey stick rolled all the way to Shachito's feet.

—He thought that replenishing her lollipop allowed her to recover her stamina.

But that was Shachito's misunderstanding.

Inuko's body had already been so exhausted that not even the candy could bring her back.

The time for the strongest warrior to overwhelm *Shinpu* was much too short.

The purple lightning in his sight scattered as if it was strings cut off.

Losing her power, Inuko became prey for the caterpillars. Swallowed by the surging caterpillars, she was pounded against the antenna installed on the center of the roof.

The now-expressionless Shachito saw the figure of Inuko with a metallic part of the antenna stabbing her abdomen.

Inuko's body slumped as she lost her strength, her goggles falling from her to the roof.

The girl's body collapsed out of the metallic stick drenched in fresh blood. Since the roof was curved, gravity caused her body to roll far down.

Shachito only accepted reality when he saw the girl's body fall down from the dome.

"...INUKOOO!"

He unconsciously grabbed the hockey stick and stood up.

He was trying to head out to save Inuko, but *Shinpu* stood in front of him.

"...Dost thou still stand in my way?"

Shachito's expression stiffened with a start.

He widened his eyes, fear once again reborn inside him. A twinge similar to the beating of a heart could be felt from the remaining traces of the caterpillars' fangs on his limbs, robbing him of his reasoning power.

His mind was blanking out with fear—

"GAAAAAHHH!!!"

Screaming, he pounded the roof with his fist.

Ripping his skin, a flower of red blood dyed the roof. He possibly also cracked his bones, as the "pain" pierced all the way to his brain through his arm.

—Don't be afraid of pain. It's the proof you're alive.

He encouraged his legs that were paralyzed by fear.

"Inuko—"

He bit his lips so hard they spilled blood. Shachito felt new pain, yet it helped retrieve his blurring consciousness.

—I wasn't able to become the strongest warrior.

Rising up, he rotated the hockey stick.

"Don't die, Inuko! Aren't you the strongest warrior!"

He shouted at the top of his voice so that Inuko could hear him wherever she was.

The pain Shachito felt bound him with fear even now.

However, Shachito of the past had experienced pain that was incomparable to this.

And—

He had inflicted much crueler, ever-lasting pain on other people.

Trying to run away from pain meant running away from his sins. Shachito had to remember that as long as he was alive, he would have to fight and get hurt countless times.

"You said you and I were the same! So I'll become as strong as I can!"

Orange-colored Autumn Darters flew up from around Shachito.

The range of the flying Autumn Darters rapidly expanded.

"I'll become stronger and prove it! Prove that we were the strongest warriors!"

Shachito knew that the more he expanded the range of his ability, the more the Mushi residing in him would eat his heart. A cold sensation spread to his body from its center and emptiness started invading his heart.

You can eat as much of my dream as you'd like.

It's a hopeless dream anyway.

If it gave him power in exchange, Shachito didn't mind losing his own heart.

"So don't die...!"

Shachito's vision was dyed by a surface of Autumn Darters.

From the orange glow surrounding the whole dome flew out tens of thousands of Autumn Darters toward the night sky. A single Autumn Dater also flew from Shachito's body.

Kicking the roof, Shachito leapt to above *Shinpu*.

All the Autumn Darters immediately gathered into the raised hockey stick.

"OOOOOOOOHHH!!!"

He amplified the mass of the orange-glowing stick even further with his ability. The whirlpool of gravity absorbed all the lights around, gathering at a single point.

The sound of a bell reverberated.

The caterpillars spread all over the roof assembled, springing at Shachito.

Even while being swallowed by the flood of caterpillars Shachito kept falling toward *Shinpu*. The stick, possessing a powerful mass, tore through the swarms of caterpillars.

Shinpu fluttered his filthy robe. The caterpillars making up his original body leapt out, piercing through the body that had once been Jarre Harissi.

Shachito's hockey stick and the robed swarm of caterpillars clashed.

The large dome was unable to withstand the clash that concentrated in one spot. The entire roof was demolished as if by an explosion, sending debris dancing in the night sky.

Breaking through the thick metallic scraps, Shachito and *Shinpu* fell toward the surface.

The fighting pair fell on the baseball mound. He had already known that there was no game tonight and that all the people inside the roof had already run away following the alarms.

Even after crashing into the surface and raising dust clouds Shachito's momentum didn't stop. The storm of gravity emitted by the hockey stick created a large crater in the center of the field.

The momentum finally ceased when they were far below the ground—inside a cavity with destroyed water pipes that sent violent drops of water flying around.

Shachito used most of his power and lost the orange glow.

Out of breath, he looked down and saw—

Shinpu, who had already lost his original form as a human and turned into a mass of caterpillars.

The miasma covering him disappeared, and the robe seemed to have vanished without any trace.

"How truly regretful... My child..."

However, a scrap from a filthy cloth fluttered in the air in front of Shachito.

Falling down, it started rapidly regenerating, attempting to restore its form as a robe.

Shachito barely had any power remaining.

"...Hihah."

He was exhausted yet he made a broken smile.

"Seeing you're the one who created my ability, shouldn't you know how it works?"

He looked at the sky.

"...!"

He could feel *Shinpu* growing disturbed.

"Would you be able to bear the same weight as that attack just now?"

An Autumn Darter flew out of Shachito's body. It was his absolutely final bit of power.

As Shachito jumped to escape outside the cavity, from the night sky covered in dark clouds above him—the debris that made up the dome's roof came crashing down. Since Shachito had absolved his ability, it retrieved its former weight.

"Do be crushed to nothing."

A rain of an immeasurable weight poured down.

"OOOOOH...OOooOhhh...!"

Shinpu's death agony was crushed by large debris big enough to be a house.

The threat also reached near Shachito.

Lightening his body weight, he attempted to weave his way through the debris.

However—

He had the feeling he could hear the sounds of a bell so small it would vanish at any second.

"...!"

His feet caught by something, he tumbled down.

It was a single caterpillar. Even though the swarm of caterpillars stretched from inside the crater created by Shachito was being crushed by the debris, a single one managed to bite his leg.

As Shachito raised his eyes, he could see the entrance being blocked by a large mass of metal.

So it's a mutual kill—

He gazed at the night sky, dumbfounded.

A sharp panel falling toward him could be seen.

"...Oh, well."

This was what he thought as he approached death.

He felt as if he became a warrior at the very end.

Just that was enough for him.

The smiling figure of Shachito was covered by the rain of debris.

The rain of panels stabbed into the mound and metal planks knocked off the spectator seats around. Every time the masses of concrete smashed into the ground, the earth rumbled.

The pouring debris caused an avalanche, swallowing everything that had remained on the surface.

The chain of destruction stopped a few minutes later.

As silence returned to the mound, light laughter could be heard.

"...Hihah."

Shachito's exhausted face was reflected on the surface of the panel that had missed a direct hit by a mere few centimeters.

The very last caterpillar was squirming at his feet.

"Even if you forgive my way of living I'm not allowed to die, huh...?"

Fight until you die—

He had the feeling as if some raincoat girl ordered him this.

Shachito's shoe crushed the caterpillar.

Dying and spreading its bodily fluids, the insect became black fog and vanished into the night sky.

Looking up to the dome's empty ceiling, the black clouds covering the skies were already gone. Even the floating image of the church vanished without a trace.

Shinpu's power wave was completely gone.

Since he was alive, he still had things to do. Standing up and pushing debris aside, he went through the still-functional entrance.

Exiting the outside while dragging the hockey stick, he soon found traces of blood.

"...Hihahah."

He held his forehead, feeling he was about to go crazy.

While Shachito laughed, big tears flowed down his eyes.

There was a small pool of blood at the spot where he thought Inuko had fallen to. And the thing left there wasn't her raincoat-clad figure.

It was a cellphone.

A single, short sentence was visible on the screen of the cellphone left on the ground.

—You passed.

There were no words of praise.

Nor any words of farewell.

Only that one, short sentence.

"...Hahah...hahahah..."

With his shoulders shaking, Shachito's laughter echoed in the silent surroundings for a long time.

Shiohara Shachito's "final test".

Its form was a "supplementary lesson".

—Passed.

5.06 The Others

Rio's turn drew near.

Waiting backstage, her mind was numbed due to how tense and agitated she was.

Jarre had appeared before her in a form unchanged from before.

If so, what was that corpse she had seen?

Had she gone crazy from all the pressure?

Would she be able to act out her role in this condition?

Her heartbeats became abnormally fast.

"Uuuh..."

Her turn approached moment by moment.

Maybe I should just run away—

Such thoughts surfaced in her mind.

She had been accepted in the audition only by luck. And so she thought of just running away from the Concertgebouw without thinking of the consequences.

Having a dream led to nothing but pain.

Giving up on everything, not wishing for anything and spending her days without any pressure would obviously be more enjoyable.

"...!"

It happened just as her tension reached its peak and she averted her eyes from the stage in search of an escape route.

The entrance door, behind the very last audience seats, opened.

Since the seats were dark, once light entered she knew immediately who it

was.

"...Shachito...senpai."

She clenched the fists fastened against her chest.

The bell sounds—

The cracked metallic sounds that remained in her head— "..."

Were gone.

So she felt.

Since she was far she couldn't see well, but Shachito seemed to be somewhat unsteady on his feet. Was he tired due to having hurried all the way there?

There still remained some tension.

And anxiousness paralyzed her feet as always.

However—her doubts were gone.

"...Yeah."

She would fight.

So she thought.

She wanted to show off to Shachito, who was said to live irresponsibly and thoughtlessly.

As long as she thought this, she could keep giving her best— "I'm going!"

Raising her voice, Rio leapt into the stage.

She felt as if she could hear a painful groan—a hoarse voice.

But instead of it, pushing her back was a deep, kind voice.

"Yeah, do your best."

Jarre Harissi's calm voice was mixed with the cheers from the audience and vanished.

6.00 Shachito The Last

Shiohara Shachito left the Concertgebouw before watching the conclusion of the play.

The battle between Mushitsuki would soon be sniffed out by the Special Environmental Preservation Bureau. He definitely didn't want to be found out by such an organization and lose his freedom.

Connecting the Mushitsuki with Shachito who would have gone missing should be difficult even for the SEPB. Until now he had perfectly concealed his status as a Mushitsuki.

Only Rio knew about him coming in contact with Inuko. And since he had countless friends that were much closer to him than Rio, whether the investigation would reach all the way to her depended on luck.

"I wonder where Inuko went."

He sent his wounded face looking around Oranje Land illuminated by the moonlight.

"—Oh well. She won't shut up about training if I'll be found by her again anyway."

Straddling his So10 parked on the wayside, he revved up the engine. He had lost his timing to bring Inuko back her hockey stick, so he decided to take it along for the ride. He put his helmet and fastened its metal fixtures, holding the motorbike in place.

Before leaving Oranje Land he turned around to look at the Concertgebouw once last time.

"Rio-chan sure was cute. Just like I thought I did well trying to hit on her."

His cute underclassman's acting was majestic. She would definitely be able to

keep giving her best efforts in pursuit of her dream from now on.

Masaki Rio.

The girl *Shinpu* first set his eyes on as a vessel.

There was the possibility that she might be targeted again by another one of his fragments.

If possible Shachito would've liked to stay at her side and protect her, but he couldn't stay in Holland City. Just checking on her once in a while through emails would be good enough.

Because he had another way to protect her.

"No, if I'm talking about cute, then surprisingly Inuko's the one who..."

He muttered with a light smile.

Fighting.

As the successor of a berserker, what Shachito could do was only to fight.

As long as the battlefield favored Shachito he would fight.

He would keep on fighting until he exhausted himself.

"I think Rio-chan's the type to grow beautiful as she gets older."

Even now mumbling about such silly things, Shachito took off on his So1o.

He didn't turn to look back in the direction of Holland City.

He had no regrets.

He had no worries either.

He already knew what he had to do.

"Hmm, can't let myself hesitate, seriously."

Shiohara Shachito's journey to annihilate the fragments of *Shinpu*.

—Start.

Traveler

"Hello, this is Inuko."

Shishidou Inuko was outside Holland City, on the coastal national highway.

The public telephone installed near the bus stop was of the type that needed coins, rare nowadays.

Illuminated by the streetlights, Inuko raised a bright smile.

"My mission is complete. Raising the next generation of Mushitsuki and readying them for the next fight—I believe I have accomplished this. You probably do not need all the fine details. I will also not say anything to the Central Headquarters. I believe my students will find out the answer."

Speaking to the answering machine that couldn't possibly respond, she spoke in a calm voice.

"My fight ends here. —I am grateful for you giving me the path to live. I pray for your health... Branch Director Haji."

Inuko left these words behind for the one and only person in the world with whom she spoke formally.

There was a person who had saved Inuko when she despaired of her dream and desired to find a duty.

It was the man called Haji Keigo. Inuko was only able to live so far because of him giving her the mission to raise her successors.

As she returned the receiver to its place, she made a wish in her heart.

Shiohara Shachito—she wanted him to find a new goal for living as well.

It would become his power after all.

"Huu."

She made a deep breath.

Looking up the night sky, she could see nothing but stars.

"I guess I'll get going."

She wore her helmet and got on the Vespa parked near the coastal road.

The night air felt pleasant.

"Ah, it feels good."

The red Vespa was silent. The fingers needed to rev up the engine were unmoving.

—If possible, she wanted to be able to watch over her students fighting until the very end.

But she had no regrets.

She could clearly envision them living frantically and fighting bravely if she closed her eyes.

She had raised all sorts of Mushitsuki. At times they shunned her, at times they adored her, and at times they even fought her, but even so she managed to raise them into fully-grown warriors. —There were some that were yet to become fully-fledged warriors, but she knew that even these students would eventually become splendid.

She could only think about her students' future.

She didn't care about the battlefield she had left behind.

Inuko thought not of herself, but of her students living in the harsh yet beautiful world.

"Oh, I see..."

Beneath the starry sky she felt the waves of the Mushitsuki spreading in the land.

All of them overflowed with life energy.

"So you were the ones to save me, guys..."

She noticed it only at the very end.

The sinful Mushitsuki that knew nothing except fighting.

The berserker who had been abandoned by the battlefield was saved by the potential of those she had trained.

She was finally made to notice this fact.

She wanted to thank all of them from the bottom of her heart.

Thank you.

"Fufu... I also still have a lot... to lea...rn..."

Shaking violently, Inuko's body inclined and collapsed to the ground.

Red fresh blood spread on the dry ground.

While feeling the breaths of Mushitsuki living around the world— With a content smile on her face—

Shishidou Inuko's "scouting" journey was...

—Completed.

Afterword

Hello, this is Iwai Kyouhei.

It has been exactly three years since my debut. When I saw my prize-winning work being lined on the shelves of a bookstore I was truly happy.

Judging from the fact that at the same time I also thought that "having just one volume there is lonely", I think I am heading in a good direction, but I also think that I am far from my ideal.

Including my debut work, the "Mushi Uta" series is still in serialization. "Mushi Uta Bug", who can be said to be another story, it also the same.

Both of them are in the midst of accelerating the story.

Even though I am writing these two at the same time, I want to keep developing them.

As usual, let us talk a bit about this current volume.

Last volume felt like it reached a stopping place in the story about the important characters.

Should I call it the end of the first part?

Because of that I made something like a side-story in this work.

I thought that while the main characters pushed the story in one direction there obviously had to have been incidents and happenings just as big in other places.

The events taking place in parallel at a completely different place were also connected to the past or the future.

Even this volume, which could be called the *Shinpu* Arc, should advance the story.

About negative dreams.

Because there are all kinds of dreams, Mushitsuki are also diverse. While there are people whose dreams themselves serve as their driving force, there are also times when they will get disheartened by the harsh reality and end up with regrets.

They will lose what was important to them through the course of their objective.

Or perhaps their very goal itself hinders them.

Since they're human they hate pain, so I believe they carry wounds that will never disappear.

However, what they gain from this will definitely be connected to their next goal.

And if what they've gained becomes their support, then their regret towards what they failed to achieve should also motivate them. Even I, writing about such things, have an intrinsic feeling of regret when I can't achieve my ideals.

I believe that having things go your way is rarer.

Perhaps the regret we feel at such times will become the power to keep moving forward.

About inheriting dreams.

Talking about an "inheritance" seems cool.

I feel like it would be easier to understand if I call it "influence" instead.

I believe that there are many wishes born from a complex pertaining to positive influence such as admiring someone or wanting to help people.

That is why these sorts of dream will never vanish, and they will always keep appearing.

On the other hand, if there is somewhere a person whose dream was cut in the middle, then it would also cause others to disappear as a chain reaction. Perhaps the Mushi, who are trying to devour their hosts' dream and kill them, are trying to cause this impossible phenomenon.

But I will only be so fastidious and argumentative inside the afterword.

In this work I would like to depict adolescents purely being influenced and influencing each other.

Now for thanks.

For these last three years, I was under the care of my supervisor Onai-san. Everyone in the editorial department including Yamaguchi-san has also taken care of me. Please keep helping me.

I also have to express my enormous gratitude toward the illustrator Ilo-san. The loveliness of your illustrations seems to be increasing along with the volume count, and you also keep on pushing my back at difficult times.

Also, to those of you holding this book in your hands, my great readers.

Thank you very much. I have been receiving letters ever since my debut, and after years of seeing the changes in the content of these letters I have been able to feel the passing of three years. Every time I receive a letter from the very first person, it gives me the power to keep writing.

From now on, along with increasingly expanding the story I will also focus on converging toward the climax.

I will do my best so that I could keep delivering it to you until the end.

November 2005

Iwai Kyouhei

Notes

1. ↑ Katakana, one of the Japanese writing systems, is mostly used for foreign words. Seeing as some parts of the city shown later actually refer to Holland, even though in Japanese it is written/pronounced "Horanto", the intention seems to be for the name to be the same.
2. ↑ Kanji is the writing system used for most Japanese words. As mentioned before, it seems that the city's name was actually made Holland after this merge.
3. ↑ This time the school name is actually written in Kanji so I left the romanization as-is to differentiate the school and the city.
4. ↑ On Japan it is customary for girls to give chocolates to boys on Valentine's day, but there could be several types of these gifts: honmei-choco (given out of romantic feelings), giri-choco (given out of obligation, such as between acquaintances or colleagues), or, in this case, tomo-choco (given between friends).
5. ↑ a type of traditional Japanese hat; as noted it often appears in anime or period drama.
6. ↑ The original is a mix-up between "candy" and "rain", both "ame", but I wanted to at least try some localization.
7. ↑ Basically, "doggy". The "Inu" from Inuko's name is also "dog".